

Case Studies of Best Practices

March 2000



Alternative Schools and Programs 1998-99



Public Schools of North Carolina
State Board of Education
Department of Public Instruction
Office of Instructional and Accountability Services
Division of Accountability Services, Evaluation Section

**ALTERNATIVE LEARNING PROGRAMS
CASE STUDIES**

March 2000

*“Something to do,
Someone to love,
Something to hope for.”*

Acknowledgments

This report is part of the statewide, legislatively mandated evaluation of alternative learning programs. The evaluation is conducted by the Evaluation Section of the Division of Accountability Services of the NC Department of Public Instruction. This report is the collaborative work of several individuals. Dr. John Hawes, private consultant, was lead author of the report. Dr. Lynn Dillard, also a private consultant, and Ms. Dee Brewer, Senior Research and Evaluation Consultant for DPI, each wrote particular case study reports for Dr. Hawes. Dr. Carolyn Cobb wrote the introductory overview and synthesis across case studies. Dr. Peter Neenan, private consultant, also contributed to the initial framework for the writing of the report. Dr. Hawes, Dr. Dillard, Ms. Brewer, Dr. Neenan, along with Dr. Stephen Blackwelder (Center for Urban Affairs), and Dr. David Langmeyer (private consultant) conducted the case study site visits and analyzed data from those visits for this report. Ms. Andrea Barefoot, Education Evaluation Consultant, and Ms. Kathleen Snyder, with the Center for Urban Affairs, assisted with the finishing touches along with the printing and distribution of the report. Dr. Carolyn Cobb, Chief Consultant of the Evaluation Section of the DPI Division of Accountability Services, along with the other evaluation team members, developed the evaluation design for the study. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the many alternative and regular educators as well as parents, students, and community members without whom the study would not have been possible.

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Issues and Recommendations A Synthesis Across Three Reports

These recommendations are drawn from three alternative learning program (ALP) evaluation reports submitted to the State Board of Education in March 2000, as well as from legislative action related to ALPs in the 1999 Legislative Session and other (SBE) policy decisions in the 1998-99 school year. Some of these legislative and policy changes relate to recommendations in ALP evaluation reports from previous years. The three evaluation reports submitted to the State Board of Education are (1) Alternative Learning Programs Evaluation, 1998-99, (2) Case Studies of Best Practices in Alternative Learning Programs, 1998 and 1999, and (3) Qualifications of Teachers and Administrators in Alternative Learning Programs, 2000. The first two reports address the evaluation that was conducted during the 1998-99 school year. The third report is part of the 1999-2000 evaluation but is being presented prior to the 2000 ALP evaluation report in order to send it to the General Assembly before the 2000 legislative session begins.

Because change is an incremental process and the development of ALPs to meet diverse student needs is still in an early stage in many LEAs, most recommendations from previous evaluations continue to be relevant. In addition, the State Board of Education and the General Assembly passed several policies in 1998-99 that address some of the previous recommendations as well as the issues identified in the current evaluation. The issues and recommendations discussed here will update the status of previous recommendations and address any new areas identified.

Alternative Learning Programs Defined

The evaluation of ALPs uses a specific definition to identify ALPs for inclusion in the annual statewide evaluation. Each year LEAs identify programs they refer to as “alternative” that do not meet this specific definition. Although districts are required to track special state funds spent on ALPs, these programs can still differ from the state definition used for the evaluation. These may be needed programs, but they do not reflect the same kind of interventions typically found in programs that deliver core instruction to at-risk youth separately from the regular school program.

In the 1999 legislative session, GS155C-47 (32a) required that the state develop a definition for ALPs. The State Board of Education approved a definition for alternative learning programs, along with a definition that distinguishes “programs” from official “schools” and a revised definition of “at-risk students” (SBE Policy Manual, January 1999). The adopted definition is similar to the one used in the ALP evaluation for the last four years.

Recommendation One: *The common definition of alternative learning programs should ensure better consistency of program type and help guide local education agencies (LEAs) in developing a continuum of services for at-risk students. LEAs should carefully consider this definition as they develop and refine their ALPs.*

State Board of Education ALP Definition. Alternative Learning Programs are defined as services for students at risk of truancy, academic failure, behavior problems, and/or dropping out of school, and they better meet the needs of individual students. They serve students at any level who are suspended and/or expelled, have dropped out and desire to return to school, have a history of truancy, are returning from juvenile justice settings, and whose learning styles are better served in an alternative setting. They provide individualized programs outside of a standard classroom setting in a caring atmosphere in which students learn the skills necessary to redirect their lives. An alternative learning program must provide the primary instruction for selected at-risk students, enroll students for a designated period of time, usually a minimum of one academic grading period, and offer course credit or grade-level promotion credit in core academic areas. Alternative learning programs may also address behavioral or emotional problems that interfere with adjustment to, or benefiting from, the regular education beyond regular school hours, provide flexible scheduling, and/or assist students in meeting graduation requirements other

than course credits. Alternative learning programs for at-risk students typically serve students in an alternative school or alternative program within the regular school.

Availability of Alternative Learning Programs

Effective with the 2000-2001 school year, every LEA must establish at least one ALP, unless they can document the lack of need and receive a waiver from the State Board of Education. The 1998-99 evaluation found that 11 LEAs (Appendix D) reported not having an ALP consistent with the definition used in the evaluation. The definition of ALPs now in SBE policy should help to ensure that appropriate services are available for the most at-risk students and that funds are spent on somewhat similar types of programs.

Recommendation Two: The definition provided in SBE policy should be the basis for judging whether this mandate is met and for tracking At-Risk Student/ Alternative School and Programs funds that are directed to ALPs. However, the current types of ALPs do not address the multiplicity of student needs. Further, the current number of ALPs is inadequate for the number of students who need them. Given the lack of adequate funding cited by many ALPs and the costs of providing services to at-risk students, providing additional services and programs will require persistence, reprioritizing, creativity, and a continuing commitment from state and local educators and policymakers.

Coordination between Regular Schools and ALPs

Previous evaluation reports have consistently noted the lack of coordination and communication between the home or referring school and the ALPs. At present, home schools assume no accountability and limited if any responsibility for students once they leave the home school. Further, they provide little if any transition support when students return to their home school. Therefore, students who enroll in ALPs and apply themselves to improve behavior and catch up academically, often return to the same conditions in their home schools that caused them to fail in the first place. It is no surprise that many students either do not want to return to their home schools, if they do, continue to have problems, and either fail again, returning to the ALPs, or drop out of school entirely. The case studies conducted in 1998 and 1999 reinforce this concern.

Although alternative educators typically express concern about the lack of communication, support and coordination with the regular/feeder schools, some regular school educators have expressed concern about lack of communication from the ALP. Complaints from regular educators, however, are infrequent and generally concern the lack of feedback when a student who is referred to an ALP is not accepted. Some regular educators express the desire to know why the student was not accepted by the ALP.

Similarly, ALP staff and students feel that many regular school educators perceive them negatively and often resent money spent on these students. Many ALP programs cited comments made by non-ALP educators that indicated “good money was being thrown at bad students” or that “students want to go there because it’s fun.”

Clearly, this issue will be a long-term one and will require continued attention and monitoring by the LEA. The 1999 legislation addresses procedures to be used by schools referring students to ALPs, effective January 1, 2000. These procedures require documentation of how the student is identified as being at-risk of academic failure or as being disruptive or disorderly. The reasons for the referral and all relevant student records must also be provided to the ALP.

Recommendation Three: LEAs need to work with their referring schools and ALPs to develop structures and procedures that will lead to better communication and collaboration among all schools in meeting the needs of at-risk students. Though not a requirement specified in the legislation, evaluation results continue to point to the needs for (a) communication with referring parties when students are not admitted to ALPs about the reasons why they were not admitted and development of appropriate interventions for those students within the regular school, (b) transition plans, after-care, and follow-up when students are returned to the home school, and (c) constructive ways to address prevalent negative perceptions and images of the ALP by other educators and the community. Further, (d) standards and

academic expectations for ALP students should be clearly communicated to all educators in an effort to ensure that academic rigor, with appropriate supports, are built into the program.

Multiple Models of ALPs and a Continuum of Services

The 1998-99 ALP Evaluation as well as previous evaluations found that students with multiple needs are frequently placed in one program. While small, flexible programs might be able to adjust their instruction and interventions according to diverse needs, it is increasingly difficult for programs to accommodate the growing range in the degree, variety, and severity of student needs in one setting. At the same time, a variety of types of interventions often are not available in a given LEA. Thus, an ALP may become the target placement for a greater variety and severity of needs than originally intended because it is the only option that exists. Indeed, several of the ALP best practice case study sites revealed a change over time in the nature of the student population from that for whom the ALP was originally designed. Because the ALP student population is characterized by so many factors that put them at risk, there is great need for comprehensive support services to address the personal and social problems that impede student success in school and in the community. Few ALPs have the needed student support staff.

These diverse needs call for multiple types of services and programs, comprehensive support services, and more than one type of ALP. Given that LEAs already have limited funds for ALPs and related services, providing additional programs and services presents a daunting task. The need for a continuum of services for at-risk students was identified in the May 1999 evaluation report entitled, *Alternative Education for Suspended and Expelled Students* (May 1999). This group of students has become an increasing concern for educators and policymakers as they attempt both to provide an education for suspended and expelled students and to keep the schools and community safe. The report recognized that, while ALPs might be one appropriate placement for such students, many ALPs were not designed for suspended and expelled students and many of these students would not be appropriately placed in any ALP.

Recommendation Four: Expanded services are needed for mild to severe discipline and behavior problems of various types both within and outside of the school setting. Multiple ALPs and/or programs within the ALP may be needed.

Continuum of Services Development at the State and Local Levels. At the direction of the State Superintendent, a DPI working group developed a draft continuum of services, as a beginning framework of potential services for a variety of student needs. The School Improvement Division convened a task force comprised of multiple state agencies (including offices from the Department of Health and Human Services, the Office of Juvenile Justice, and the Center for the Prevention of School Violence), LEA staff, and community representatives to address these issues. This task force is now being co-facilitated with the Office of Juvenile Justice and is focusing on the needs of the more serious problems of students that schools and the community are increasingly facing (e.g., expelled students, substance abuse, abused and neglected students, and students returning from state institutions). Thus, the state will develop a broad-based continuum of existing and needed state services.

Recommendation Five: LEAs should work with their local community agencies and civic groups to develop a continuum of existing services, as well as to identify needed services not currently available, for a wide range of types and severity of at-risk needs. One good model is the continuum completed by the Asheville City Schools in collaboration with multiple community groups and agencies. The state continuum will also provide guidance as LEAs consider needed options.

Services for Students with Severe Needs. As noted above, schools are increasingly facing the challenge of providing an appropriate education for students who have substantial emotional and behavioral, as well as academic, needs. Long-term suspended and expelled students are among those challenges. A subcommittee of the Juvenile Justice Council, chaired by Judge Kenneth Titus, has been charged with determining needs for suspended and expelled students. Since the DPI/OJJ collaborative task force includes the relevant personnel and is also addressing this issue, Judge Titus is attending these meetings and will incorporate resulting recommendations when his subcommittee reports back to the Juvenile Justice Council. These recommendations should address state-level needs for programs and funding, as well as provide guidance to LEAs, training schools, and detention centers in

developing appropriate programs and services.

Finally, LEAs should be working with Local Juvenile Crime Prevention Councils (JCPCs), which are mandated in each county and include diverse community organizations, in developing programs for early intervention and to serve seriously disruptive and adjudicated youth. It is important that each agency involved understand the roles and responsibilities, services and limitations, of all other youth-serving agencies. There should be *clear points in the process* where the delivery of services to a given youth “*passes*” from one agency to another, in terms of *primary responsibility*. Roles, responsibilities, and appropriate supports should also be clearly understood in *transitions* of youth from one setting to another. Further, the continuum should be designed as a “*two-way street*”, clearly designating procedures, processes, roles, responsibilities, and necessary supports, when a youth manages to re-enter the mainstream.

Recommendation Six: *Complete the state-level continuum and recommendations for services and programs for at-risk youth, especially for suspended and expelled youth. LEAs should examine services locally, including working with the Local Juvenile Crime Prevention Councils to identify existing services and develop programs where gaps exist. Such services would be part of a larger continuum of services.*

Comprehensive Services

The need for instructional support services (i.e., counseling, social work, and psychological services) for alternative learning program students has been noted in previous evaluation reports. The survey of ALP administrators in the current evaluation illustrated just how limited these services are for students. Out of 90 responding administrators, there are a total of 29 full-time and 17 part-time counselors and 16 full-time and 16 part-time social workers. School psychologists are virtually non-existent, with only two full-time and 15 part-time personnel serving 90 ALPs. Further, there was only one full-time nurse. Given the multiple needs of ALP students, especially behavioral and emotional problems, this lack of support services is striking.

Recommendation Seven: *Districts need to examine use of funds for instructional support services to ensure that services are available to ALPs. Full-time counselors likely need to be placed in every ALP. Adequate access to social work and psychological services is also critical in order to address, behavioral, emotional, and social needs of students. Physical needs may dictate better access to health services, either through full-time nurses in the district or with cooperative agreements with Health Departments.*

Staff Qualifications and Training Needs

Licensure of staff in the ALPs. Based on the preliminary results from the teacher and principal surveys in the Qualification of ALP Personnel Evaluation, teachers in ALPs hold credentials similar to all teachers statewide and most are licensed in the areas they teach. Still, a significant number of teachers – mostly in the core academic areas - are teaching in areas where they do not hold appropriate credentials. If the essential gains in academic areas for ALP students are to be made, appropriately trained grade level and subject matter teachers must be available. Also, slightly fewer teachers in middle schools hold appropriate credentials. These are grade levels that seem to hold special challenges for ALP and other educators.

While we want the best and brightest teachers in every classroom, it is especially important for ALPs. As one local school board member stated, “Kids who are performing well usually have the things these kids don’t.” Many, though certainly not all, have the capacity to learn in regular classrooms in less than ideal conditions and have parents who provide educational support and experiences outside of school that most ALP students do not receive. Students in ALPs often, in addition to lacking motivation to learn, have very different learning styles and do not have the same types of educational support from their families and communities. As one young ALP student told researchers, “I never gave up on school. My teachers gave up on me.”

Recommendation Eight: *Attracting fully licensed teachers in general is a challenge that most LEAs face. Attracting licensed teachers to ALPs is even more formidable. The LEAs and the state must*

continue to find ways to attract teachers to this challenging population, especially in the core academic areas, and to get those already teaching in ALPs fully credentialed.

ALPs need teachers with strong content knowledge, who are creative and persistent to the extent necessary to find the ways needed to teach each and every child whatever is needed. ALPs, including high school programs, need teachers who are strong in teaching the basic skills including reading, mathematics (even basic math facts of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division), and writing. Further, in touring training schools and detention centers and in discussions with staff in the Office of Juvenile Justice, the number one concern is that students, young and old, do not know how to read.

Recommendation Nine: *Appropriate reading assessments and reading specialists should be a priority for ALPs, regardless of the age of the youth served. It is essential that every child be given the opportunity to learn to read by being taught at the appropriate level of instruction and with a variety of appropriate instructional strategies. Reading skills will enhance the child's ability to learn other basic skills in mathematics and writing.*

Performance Appraisal Ratings of ALP Teachers. As noted previously, 1999 legislation encouraged LEAs to assign only teachers with at least an "above standard" performance appraisal ratings to ALPs. In the preliminary data from 90 principal/director surveys (45% return), three-fourths of the ALP teachers earned a rating of "above standard" or higher. Only about 4 percent were rated below standard or unsatisfactory. Most principals (90%) used the Teacher Performance Appraisal Instrument (TPAI) in their evaluations, although 45 percent of the principals felt that this instrument was not appropriate for ALP teachers. This response raises the question as to whether LEAs are requiring use of the TPAI for ALP teachers.

Recommendation Ten: *LEAs, assisted by appropriate state and university personnel, should study the issue of the kinds of instruments and procedures that are appropriate for conducting performance appraisals for ALP staff. Clearly, there are skills required that go beyond those identified on the TPAI.*

Professional Development for Teachers in ALPs. However, even when teachers do hold a license in the grade levels and subjects they teach in the ALP, finding staff who are truly prepared to work with this student population continues to be a challenge for LEAs. The extensive needs for training are reflected in the percentage of teachers indicating they need training in so many areas. The survey is corroborated by the case study comments of many teachers indicating that no teacher preparation program came close to preparing them for these kinds of students.

Out of 25 topics listed, even the least frequently needed training area was needed by almost one-third of the teachers (i.e., teaching through group discussion). However, it is notable that the areas where training was most highly needed are in working with the more severe problems of students (e.g., substance abuse, abused and neglected students, and students returning from training institutions), as well as strategies to help students scoring below Level III on state tests. This may reflect the changing nature of the students being referred to ALPs.

Principals and directors of ALPs were asked about the number one factor they consider in hiring staff for ALPs. Over one-half indicated the ability to teach diverse learners (and most teachers had received training in this area) and one-fifth noted the ability to manage student behavior, followed closely by being a caring person. Interestingly, content knowledge was indicated by only three percent.

Recommendation Eleven: *ALP teachers and administrators need high quality and different kinds of training in order to be effective with students enrolling in these settings. Both the state and LEAs must develop extensive training opportunities for staff in ALPs based on the student populations they serve and identified needs of staff. Given the nature of the needs expressed on staff surveys, LEAs and ALPs should work to identify and tap sources of expertise within other youth-serving agencies that work similar populations of youth including aggressive and violent, adjudicated, substance abusing youth and those with moderate to severe social and emotional problems, such as abused and neglected youth or those in state or local mental health facilities.*

Given the need to help students improve in core academic areas and on the state assessments, LEAs should ensure that ALP staff receive the opportunity to attend any training offered other educators on working with Level I and II students, preparing students for grade-level promotion standards, and the like. Still, ALP teachers may need training that is different in some respects because of the other problems these youth are experiencing. Very few students currently enrolled in ALPs are there because of academic difficulties alone. They most often have a host of problems that together negatively impact their ability to learn.

Professional Development for ALP Administrators. The vast majority of ALP administrators reported they consider themselves appropriately prepared in academic, behavioral, and leadership areas. The area in which the lowest percentage reported considering themselves adequately prepared was “accountability / evaluation / program improvement”. Still, 80 percent consider themselves to be well trained in this area. Even with these ratings, a large percentage expressed needs for training, especially in systems to provide consistency, high expectations, and instructional strategies for diverse learning styles. At least 40 percent of principals identified training needs in creative fiscal management, working with suspended and expelled youth, recruiting effective staff, working with community agencies, and involving parents.

Recommendation Twelve: *Like teachers, ALP administrators need professional development specifically designed to meet their needs. LEAs might work creatively with other agencies in ways described for teachers to produce some of the needed training for ALP administrators. The new state association of alternative educators is also beginning to provide meaningful staff development for ALP administrators and teachers.*

Recommendation Thirteen: *Universities need to be part of the training provided, as well as assessing how well they are preparing teachers to deal with the extensive needs of students, even those who do not end up in ALPs. Spending time in ALPs, talking to teachers, administrators, and students there would provide valuable information and insight into the kinds of training needed, both pre-service and in-service. University programs need to begin to address the changing needs of the student population in schools to better prepare all teachers, so that keys to success can be found for teaching a greater number of these students, without shipping them off to ALPs.*

Attracting and Maintaining Quality Staff to ALPs

In open-ended survey questions, both principals and teachers were asked what strategies were needed to recruit and retain quality staff in ALPs. Most of the teacher respondents (43%) indicated financial concerns: salaries, bonuses, and incentives. The next highest rated suggestion was training and stress relief (10%). Slightly over-one third of the principals noted a combination of salaries and flexibility are needed to attract and retain quality staff.

Recommendation Fourteen: *Teacher quality is the key to educating at-risk youth. Repeatedly over the years of the statewide evaluation of ALPs, legislators as well as ALP staff have suggested increasing salaries and offering bonuses or “combat pay” as a strategy for addressing the teacher quality issue. Because the needs of ALP students are so great, ALP staff, both administrators and teachers alike, are at great risk of burn out. ALP teachers have made other suggestions for addressing the teacher quality issue. They have suggested some schedule of rotation out of ALPs into other interesting assignments while they rejuvenate themselves before returning. Several times the suggestion has been made by ALP staff that other high-quality, regular classroom teachers serve even short periods of time, even a grading period during the year, as a way of increasing the respect for and understanding of these programs and the strengths and needs of the students they serve.*

Funding for ALPs

ALP staff frequently cited the need for better funding, either explicitly or implicitly (e.g., noting the need for better facilities). Expectations and demands on education are greater than ever to serve student populations that

are increasingly diverse and which include students who come to us with multiple problems beyond academic ones. With these expectations, the funding demands are increasing. Local, federal and grant funds are among those that may be sought. Creative funding and maximizing effective use of existing funds is essential. Coordinating and eliminating overlap in programs and services is essential. It is imperative that schools develop strong relationships with all family and youth serving agencies and organizations to shape a cohesive support system, pooling money, personnel, transportation systems, and other resources to solve common concerns. Currently only slightly over half (57%) of ALP administrators indicated that they are knowledgeable about the full range of programs and services funded from their LEA At-Risk Students/Alternative Schools and Programs funds. Still fewer, only about a third have input into decisions about setting priorities for how local at-risk dollars are spent.

Recommendation Fifteen: *ALP administrators should be an essential part of any LEA team looking at overall expenditures for at-risk students. They have valuable and unique experience and expertise to offer in programming for at-risk students. LEAs should include ALP administrators in developing a plan for the full-range of services and programs as well as decisions about priorities for local at-risk expenditures. Over the four years of the evaluation, ALP administrators have consistently expressed concerns over funding issues, saying they feel “like a red-headed stepchildren”. As a result of these concerns, and their unsuccessful attempts to influence local funding decisions, they have recommended that a funding stream be created which is exclusively dedicated to ALPs.*

The General Assembly has increased its appropriations to the At-Risk Students and Alternative Schools Fund every year since the consolidated fund was created. However, the current level of funding is not adequate to support and expand ALPs in ways that are needed in order to serve the growing population of students at-risk of academic failure and juvenile crime. There is growing support for providing educational opportunities for suspended and expelled students. Additionally, there are student accountability standards that will require more than ever from students as they progress through the levels of schooling.

Recommendation Sixteen: *There is recognition of the need to offer a full continuum of services to meet the needs of at-risk students, from academic to behavioral to social/emotional. Once this continuum of services is defined and related costs are determined, a schedule for funding, including priority starting points, should be developed.*

Accountability for Alternative Schools and Programs

Previous reports have addressed the issues of poor tracking and evaluation of student progress for students enrolled in ALPs. Achievement of students in alternative programs in grades 3-8 has been remarkably stagnant based on the statewide End-of-Grade (EOG) Test analyses for these students. End-of-Course (EOC) Test results (i.e., achievement at Level III or IV) for three high school courses have improved each year of the evaluation, but are still well below the state average. Documentation for other types of outcomes is minimal, other than through impressions and self-reports from ALPs. These students deserve the same kind of accountability from educators as other students. Having asserted this strong need, the evaluators also recognize that these students are among the most challenging students to educate and to keep in school and that accountability must also include other types of measures.

It is interesting to note the increase in the percent of students being enrolled in high school alternative schools for academic reasons that is reflected in the evaluation report for 1998-99. This increase may be a sign of more attention to academic needs of students or it may indicate an increase in the practice of removing poor-achieving high school students from the regular high school accountability model.

Accountability for Alternative Schools. The State Board of Education adopted revisions to the ABCs Accountability Model during the 1998-99 school year that specifically address accountability for alternative schools (SBE Policy Manual, June 1999). Alternative schools have a designated school code and a state-assigned principal. There were 67 such alternative schools in 1998-99. The new accountability policy being implemented in the 1999-2000 school year addresses most of the previous recommendations. The policy requires that alternative schools participate in the ABCs accountability program in a manner specifically designed to accommodate the diversity among the schools and the student populations served. The alternative school accountability system is based on six

components; three of which are mandated and three are locally developed. The three mandated components are achievement-based, using state test scores specifically designated by the SBE. The three locally developed components are based on the specific purposes and mission of the alternative school and must be approved by the LEA superintendent and the local board of education. Achieving three or four of these components is equivalent to meeting “expected growth” in the regular ABCs Accountability Model.

Alternative educators have expressed appreciation to the Compliance Commission and the Reporting Section of the DPI Division of Accountability Services for their determined efforts to develop a suitable ABCs Accountability Policy for alternative schools. Alternative educators have voiced the desire to be included in the ABCs Accountability process, providing the accountability requirements for alternative schools include some provision to allow measures based on the specific mission of each school. The policy now in place does just that. Further, alternative educators expressed a desire to be eligible for incentive awards for progress made, as are regular educators in the standard ABCs Accountability Model, which the current policy also affords.

Since this is the first year of implementation for the ABCs Accountability Policy for alternative schools, several aspects of the accountability policy for alternative schools bear monitoring. They include the following:

(a) It is possible for an alternative school to meet expected growth without ever addressing any of the three state assessment-based components. Thus, academic progress of students might continue to remain below acceptable levels.

(b) On the other hand, sufficient data/days in membership rules do apply to the three mandated achievement-based components for alternative schools. That means, for example, if an alternative school does not have the sufficient number of test scores for the ABCs Accountability Model, they may be limited in their ability to demonstrate enough progress to warrant exemplary incentive awards since three of the six accountability components are based on state test scores. By nature of the populations they serve, there are problems getting both previous year’s and current year’s test scores for many ALP students. There are often problems that impact the ABCs results such as a high rate of absenteeism, mobility of student population, and incorrect or incomplete data on answer sheets so that matched data are not available. For alternative schools serving grades 3-8 the impact on insufficient test data/days in membership is especially significant since the End-of-Grade score that is earned by the alternative school counts three times (for all three state test components) in their ABCs Accountability Model. If a school did not have sufficient EOG data meeting these criteria, the most they could earn in their accountability policy is three of the six components, which limits them to the “meets expectation” category. That would be the highest level of financial incentives possible in such a scenario.

(c) Membership rules for End-of-Grade tests require that the student be in membership in the school for 91 days in order for the student’s score to count in the growth component of the school’s accountability results. The requirement is 160 days for the NC High School Comprehensive Test (HSCT). In either case, whether in a regular school or alternative school, if the membership rule is not met, a student’s EOG or HSCT scores will only be reflected in the performance composite, not the growth aspect, of the school’s accountability results. Again, since the growth component of accountability program determines eligibility for incentive awards, alternative schools could be at a disadvantage. In the case of high school End-of-Course tests, the student’s scores count wherever the student is tested (unless the student is dual enrolled). If a low-performing student is sent from a regular high school to an alternative school during the last few weeks of school, the student’s score will be reflected in the accountability results for the alternative school. There is a potential for regular schools to attempt to “game the system” that is further exacerbated in the high stakes environment. Like regular schools, the less time alternative schools have to work with students, the less progress the students will demonstrate on state tests. Further, like regular schools, increased numbers of lower performing students tested in alternative schools increase the likelihood of lower test results for the school. As one LEA superintendent so aptly put it, “I might be willing to sacrifice [the accountability results of] one alternative school in order to make all my other schools look good.”

(d) Two requirements are in place, as part of the new accountability policy, to help monitor the number, percent, and demographics of students referred to alternative schools. Alternative schools are to report to their local boards of education both the number/percent and demographics of students referred to alternative schools by each sending school (calculated by month) and the number/percent and demographics of students who return to their

home schools (calculated by month).

Recommendation Seventeen: *Adding a requirement that the information referenced in(d) above be a reported item as a part of the ABCs report card or be reported as part of the ALP evaluation results or both, may encourage best practices and cooperation between regular and alternative schools to make decisions based on the best interests of students. Further, results in the ABCs Accountability Program should be monitored for alternative schools to make certain that staff have at least equal opportunity to earn incentive awards as regular schools. Other aspects referenced above need to be monitored over time and refinements may need to be made to ensure both students and alternative schools have a fair and effective accountability system.*

Accountability for Alternative Programs. While these requirements go a long way toward addressing accountability for officially designated schools, most ALPs are not official schools. Accountability for students in these programs is tied to the school in which the program is located. There are, however, alternative programs that serve several “feeder” schools. In those cases, districts determine whether each ALP student’s state test scores are returned for inclusion with the home-base school or are included with the accountability results of the school within which the alternative program is housed.

Legislation in the 1999 Session helps to address concerns about the effectiveness of ALPs by specifying new aspects of the required 15 components for each local safe school plan. These changes include requiring LEAs to identify measures of the effectiveness of efforts to assist academically and behaviorally at-risk students and an analysis of such measures for students referred to ALPs.

Recommendation Eighteen: *LEAs should develop procedures to assess the effectiveness of all ALPs, including both schools and programs. Any future statewide evaluations of ALPs should attempt to identify the measures used in each LEA and the results of their analyses.*

Student Accountability Standards: Impact on ALP Students

The Question Lingers: Who Is Responsible/Accountable for ALP Students? The new student accountability standards ratchet the stakes for students in ALPs. A student can get shuffled back and forth between his or her home-base school and the ALP, making no progress in either setting, and the only one left holding the bag is the student. Further, the potential for gaming the system is already described in the previous section on the new accountability policy for alternative schools. More than ever there is a need for a longitudinal database (SIMS replacement) for every student, making it easier to track individual progress over time, and documenting intervention strategies that have been tried with students. Valuable instructional time is lost each time a different teacher has to begin anew with a student figuring out where to start. Each student needs well-designed, individualized intervention plans that are used to guide educational decisions, and we need to stick with each student until we get somewhere. Each year the ALP evaluation results point to the fact that the longer students are enrolled (up to a year), the better their school-related outcomes. Student progress needs to be stabilized before they are returned to the regular school setting. Some students may need to remain in the ALP setting. When students are returned to their home-base schools they need appropriate supports so that they may continue their progress instead of throwing them back into the same conditions in which they failed the first time. We will never solve the problem of improving outcomes for at-risk youth until we address the joint responsibility that is needed between regular schools and ALPs for each student to succeed.

Recommendation Nineteen: *The SIMS replacement will greatly help the tracking of individual progress of students in and out of ALPs. The requirement as of January 1, 2000, that regular schools and ALPs work more closely to develop intervention plans for ALP students will help also. It is recommended that longer placements be considered working toward stabilizing students in pre-defined areas of need, before students transition back into the regular school. There is growing support from alternative educators and other central administrators working to improve services to at-risk youth for students referred to ALPs to continue to be carried on the rolls of the home-base schools. Many believe that is the only way that regular schools will have a vested interest in sharing resources and providing needed supports for students with whom they are unsuccessful.*

Mastery Learning. A number of ALPs offer course credit to students when they obtain a designated score on End-of-Course tests, sometimes with little instruction in the course and without the “seat time” requirement, which are conditions of course credit in regular schools. The practice of “flexing” instructional time is enticing because it helps students who are sometimes seemingly hopelessly behind in graduation credits have some hope of catching up to earn a high school diploma without spending lots of additional semesters or years in school. While this strategy is an attempt to address a serious problem, it is creating other even more disconcerting problems. First, EOC tests are not designed for the purpose of determining credit for a course without course completion. Second, ALP students, already disadvantaged, are further disadvantaged by limiting the range of the course content they are taught and the opportunity for interactions, discussions, and experiences that enhance learning and understanding. Instead of trading one set of problems for another, ALPs must find strategies for providing flexible options that still encompass meaningful learning. Further, what is “mastery learning” without a common definition and consistent, rigorous standards for how “mastery” will be demonstrated in each subject or content area? “Seat time” requirements for course credit are set in State Board policy for students in regular schools. Certainly, we do not want to create a double set of standards for learning that requires less of students in ALPs than in regular schools. Instead we need to provide the resources, technical expertise, and leadership so that all youth have appropriate opportunities to earn a high school diploma.

Recommendation Twenty: It is recommended that creative strategies be identified for helping students who are seriously behind in graduation credits earn sufficient credits to “catch up” so that they can graduate with a high school diploma within a reasonable amount of time. Allowing students to progress at their own rate but in an accelerated fashion with expanded opportunities to learn is important. Web-based learning is one possibility. Further, it is recommended that the possibility be explored of designing a standard set of rigorous, criterion-referenced tests, aligned with the NC Standard Course of Study, for use in ALPs. This customized assessment system would be used to appropriately determine student mastery of broad-based content knowledge to insure that students graduate with a solid academic foundation.

ALP Transportation Issues. Another issue potentially impacting progress on student accountability standards for ALP students has to do with transportation issues. Because school buses are expensive, LEAs usually stagger school start times in order to use a limited number of buses to cover more than one bus route. Further, school districts receive transportation funds based on efficiency ratings that are calculated by the state and have to do with the number of miles students live from their schools. LEAs tend to avoid practices that negatively impact their transportation funding. In cases where providing transportation for ALP students would require more school buses or would negatively impact efficiency rating, some LEAs make one of two choices that may save them transportation funds, but may not be in the best interest of students attending ALPs. Some choose either not to provide transportation for students attending ALPs or they choose to use fewer buses, which makes for very long bus rides. In the first case, not providing transportation for ALP students can lead to higher rates of absenteeism. In the second case, where there are very long bus rides, ALP students at times report spending more time riding the bus to and from school than they spend in the classroom. Their instructional day is cut short. Both practices will negatively impact the amount of instructional time for ALP students and therefore limits opportunities to learn.

Recommendation Twenty-One: State law requires LEAs that provide transportation to one student to provide transportation to all students. Some LEAs do not provide transportation for ALP students. It is recommended all LEAs be required to provide transportation services to students attending ALPs. It is further recommended that changes be made such that LEA efficiency ratings are not impacted negatively by increased mileage necessary to provide transportation to all ALP students. It is also recommended that maximum times be set for lengths of bus rides for students and that strategies be developed to work within those limits so that students do not have to cut their school day short or exhaust themselves with excessively long bus rides.

Programmatic Features of Successful ALPs

While there is no one “best model” for ALPs and different purposes may dictate different best practices, some features were consistent among ALPs that seem to be making a difference in students’ lives. These programs

usually began with a fairly clear understanding of particular needs to be addressed by the program and a deep concern for the students whom the education system had failed. A focused mission and program philosophy guided the development of most of the programs, typically with unwavering commitment to the program purpose in spite of persistent and difficult obstacles. Visionary, entrepreneurial, creative, “mover-shaker” types of leaders guided most of these ALPs. Some unique features that the evaluators termed “bright ideas” are also mentioned. Finally, some issues and recommendations continue to emerge from the data collected over the four years of the evaluation.

Small Size, More Individual Attention. While many ALPs strive to provide education based on the individual needs of students, it seems almost axiomatic to say that small size makes this possible. While over one-third of teachers returning surveys in the study on qualification of ALP staff indicated they teach 15 or fewer students per day, one-fourth of the teachers have over 32 students per day (ranging up to 185 student per day). The most teachers (36%) noted low student-teacher ratios as the most significant factor in making ALPs effective.

Some of the most exciting programs are small and provide individual and intensive interventions in both academic and behavioral/emotional areas. Since students enrolled in ALPs typically have multiple problems, including poor decision-making and problem-solving skills, individual counseling and small group work is part of the educational program. As students with more serious needs are enrolled, size likely becomes even more of a factor in effectiveness. This does not mean that programs with larger numbers are automatically ineffective. This issue relates to the purpose of the ALP and the types of students that it serves, as well as the need for a continuum of services within the LEA and its community.

Continued Focus on Academic Rigor. The continued poor performance of ALP students as a whole on statewide assessments reinforces the consistent, persistent need for high academic expectations and intervention and acceleration programs of an intense nature. Strong instructional efforts must be paired with, not replaced by, services to address problems in other aspects of a student’s life. Teacher survey results corroborate other findings on the academic needs of ALP students; they rated the vast majority of their students as below grade level. We must not back away from serious attention to academic success for these students. *Any hope for future success in work or a post-secondary education setting is best assured by academic success and high school graduation.* A sense of hope requires the belief that one can influence the future; the ability to influence one’s own future requires a sense of self-efficacy; and a sense of self-efficacy requires successful completion of the tasks at hand, including succeeding in school. The attitude reflected by “Our students cannot be expected to achieve because they have so many problems and have such low self-esteem” is not one likely to promote optimal success with students. Rather, ALP and other educators need an attitude of “Unless our students meet the academic standards, they will be less successful in resolving other life problems and improving their self-esteem.” And the case studies show that there are ALPs that embody that attitude.

Hands-On / Experiential Learning, Based on Rigorous Content with Focused Instruction. As students experience academic failure they usually become increasingly more difficult to motivate. Students in ALP settings are often on the extreme end of the continuum in terms of failure experiences. One project director described the students enrolled in her program as having “a gnawing sense of inadequacy and failure within the regular classroom; a sense of futility, ineptitude, and purposelessness, frequently exacerbated by constant negative feedback from parents, teachers, and peers.” Such feedback sometimes results in angry, defensive behavior. One LEA superintendent interviewed, who had years of experience with at-risk youth, put it this way, “If it looks like school or smells like school, they don’t want anything to do with it.” A regular school principal added that students would rather appear “bad” than “stupid”. Re-engaging these students in fruitful learning is challenging at best. ALP educators tell us that what works is to find ways to connect learning to individual student interests, to break learning down into manageable units, and to combine direct instruction of the content with hands-on demonstrations of learning. Thoughtfully enriching units of instruction with “experiences” to bring the essential learning outcomes “alive” is also effective. Exploratory and problem-solving strategies can make content and concepts more meaningful.

Strategies for experiential learning include using technology to conduct virtual tours of famous art galleries or historical battlegrounds as well as actually taking students to those places. Bringing local writers, artists, musicians, architects, mechanics, plumbers into the classroom to talk to students about how they do their work may help students see meaningful applications of the things they are learning in their classrooms. The use of field trips, classroom “activities”, and even using technology, is means, not ends, to motivate students, address diverse learning

styles, and create meaning. The teacher must have a clear understanding of, and focus on, specific and important learning targets coupled with a strong foundation in rigorous content to drive the selection of appropriate methods for hands-on or experiential learning.

Personal Connections with Students. It is clear from the case studies that one of the important features of successful ALPs is the connection between the adults and students. Comments from students in particular focused on the caring nature of the relationships in the ALP, the willingness of staff to go the extra mile, and the sense that staff believed in them. These comments obviously result from staff effort that exceeds a typical workday or merely content instruction. Factors likely to increase the possible personal connections between staff and students should be carefully considered by LEAs in designing ALPs. Such factors might include low staff-student ratio, smaller program size, programs focused on particular types of needs, and – especially – the recruitment of special people. Comments by LEA administrators, regular school educators, and school board members all pointed to the importance of finding the “right people.”

To Be of Use. To young people who have experienced limited success in school and feel a sense of inadequacy in most areas of their lives, being useful to other people may be one important way to build confidence and a sense of efficacy. While there is limited data from the current evaluation, the ALPs incorporating service learning or other strategies that link students to service for others are worthy of consideration by other ALPs.

CASE STUDY OVERVIEW

BACKGROUND

During 1998 and 1999, teams of observers under direction of the State Department of Public Instruction made visits to ten alternative learning programs (ALPs) representative of those operated by school systems across North Carolina. The primary purpose of the visits was to identify and report features and practices that appeared to make these programs more effective with students as well as to identify needs and issues that require resolution.

Because we were looking for “effective” programs, the evaluation staff started by trying to identify programs with documented positive outcomes for students. A solicitation letter was sent to all ALPs requesting self- or other-nominations of programs that they deemed to be effective, including the types of data that were available to document positive outcomes (e.g., better attendance, reduced dropout rate, better test scores). In addition, state assessment data that were already available to the evaluation staff were analyzed to identify any programs that seemed to have better test results than the ALPs as a whole statewide. However, due to limited numbers of tests per program, especially at the high school level, or the limited evidence for improved test scores, notable results were difficult to discern. Also, many programs indicated that they had produced positive outcomes, but few of them maintained data on these outcomes that could be shared with evaluators.

Evaluation staff reviewed the nominations and any data received, looked at state test scores to the extent possible, and considered what had been learned over time about some of the ALPs in the state. While few programs could be identified on the basis of overwhelmingly positive student outcome data, several were identified that appeared to be moving to positive outcomes and that had compelling program approaches that offered the most promise for helping students academically and/or behaviorally. Finally, at least one program was selected because it represented a model to serve a population of increasing concern in the state (suspended students).

Sites also were selected on the basis of diversity across geography, rural/suburban/urban areas, and the nature of the program. Eleven ALPs were finally selected. Since Jackson County had just started a middle school program (New Millennium), that program is addressed along with the previously existing high school program (Discovery II).

- Alleghany County Options Alternative Program
- Brunswick Learning Center
- Cabarrus County Hartsell Center
- Kannapolis City Schools Second Chance Alternative Education Program
- Dare County Alternative High School
- Winston Salem/Forsyth County LEAP Academy
- Haywood County Central High School
- Jackson County Discovery II and New Millennium
- Wake County Mount Vernon Redirection Middle School

This report of the case study site visits includes a synthesis across the 10 programs that specifically addresses promising practices – either common across several programs or a unique but compelling feature – and needs and issues that need resolving. Individual summaries of each ALP are also presented in detail.

OVERVIEW OF PROGRAMS

These Alternative Learning Programs (ALPS) represent the range of program types throughout the state. Many of them started out with one population focus and have modified that focus over time given needs within the school system. Four of the programs serve both middle and high school students. Three serve only middle school students (one includes fifth grade) and four serve only grades 9-12.

Length of stay in programs varies. Some students stay in the program only a short time, while in others students remain for a year or more. Some programs have flexible schedules, while others are more structured; some operate as a separate school and others as a program within or attached to a regular school; and, while all attempt to provide more individualized instruction and attention for students than they are accustomed to receiving in regular schools, the degree of individualization varies from place to place.

Size of programs varies dramatically, from 5 to over 400 students over an academic year. This variation results to some extent from the program focus, with programs addressing multiple student needs generally being much smaller than those focusing on short-term placement (e.g., for short-term suspended) or only academic acceleration.

The nature of student problems range from a focus on suspended students to academic needs and success to disruptive/behavior problems. However, most programs serve students who have a combination of academic and behavioral needs. In fact, this emerges as one of the issues facing ALPs. However, the types of students served by all of alternative programs often seem to share one common denominator offered by one project director to describe the students enrolled in her program:

“...a gnawing sense of inadequacy and failure within the regular classroom; a sense of futility, ineptitude, and purposelessness, frequently exacerbated by constant negative feedback from parents, teachers, and peers. Such feed back sometimes results in angry, defensive behavior. In some cases, the regular school environment...serves as a constant reminder of their failure to succeed within its boundaries. A lack of apparent accomplishment or purpose frequently results in a resignation to failure. In response, many such students seek ways to control, or master, their environment through whatever means available to them to establish some sense of identity or purpose, whether infamous or meritorious.”

Persons interviewed at other alternative programs in one way or another confirmed that they try to keep in mind that these are the types of life experiences students must be helped to get beyond, if their programs are to be successful.

Although instructional methods vary greatly from program to program, the direction is generally the same. All programs emphasize they follow the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and take care to ensure their students are prepared for state end-of-grade and end-of-course tests. There is one instructional method that is commonly used, however. That is the use of computers to assist in student learning.

Another condition shared by most alternative programs is their location in *old facilities*. Some of the buildings were once used for regular schools or for other purposes, such as housing a bank. Some of the facilities have received extensive renovations, but in most cases lack of financial resources seem to have held improvements to a minimum. Plans to move next year to different, and presumably improved, facilities were noted at two programs. In another case, a new facility was occupied just before the observation visit was made, but the amount of space provided through new construction was too small for the program's size.

PROMISING PRACTICES

A number of innovative or noteworthy approaches adopted frequently by alternative learning programs are commented upon here. They may hold promise for adaptation by other existing programs or programs developed in the future. While some of these practices overlap, they are grouped here into topics that seemed to best capture the intent across programs. Unique program aspects found during case study visits that were especially interesting to team members are addressed in the next Section called “Bright Ideas.” These practices may not be widespread for broad documentation of effectiveness, but they seemed to be compelling or to hold promise for other ALPs.

Philosophy and Mission

One of the compelling aspects of these case study ALPs was a strong sense of purpose and mission. Missions and philosophies might be stated or implied, yet observers heard similar themes running through the programs visited. Themes reflected the beliefs that programs should provide students an opportunity to complete an

education, gaining the knowledge and skills that they would need to succeed outside of school. Philosophies frequently were student-focused, building on individual needs and learning styles. Success for these students and knowing someone cared was deemed important, with staff noting that these students had succeeded in few other places.

Selected quotes from various programs capture these themes. “Provide an opportunity for each student to gain skills needed to function effectively in the world at large.” “Everyone is entitled to the opportunity for an education.” “Provide a student-centered curriculum that meets the needs of students with diverse abilities, problems, backgrounds and concerns.” “Provide at-risk students with an opportunity to succeed...in an environment that emphasizes positive reinforcement of achievement.” Perhaps the philosophy established by Glen Jacobs, the first director of Jackson County’s Discovery II program, sums up these thoughts: “*Give the students something to do, someone to love, and something to hope for.*” While some of the philosophies stated could be espoused by almost any regular middle or high school, statements of more specific aims and objectives ALPs have for the particular students they serve begin to distinguish them from regular schools. One program outlines its objectives this way:

- provide alternatives for students unable to successfully participate in a regular program;
- encourage student dropouts to return and complete their education;
- assist students in completing courses required for graduation;
- provide individualized instruction in accord with each students needs;
- encourage re-entry into the regular school
- prepare students to become productive citizens and life-long learners with a strong sense of “ethical and moral obligations to oneself, others, the community, and the world at large.”

Staff members at another alternative program stated that its goals are “to enhance student achievement, teach responsible classroom behaviors; motivate regular school attendance; help students change behaviors that have contributed to students being unsuccessful in regular schools; strengthen the relationship between the student, parents, and school in a positive way; return the student to the regular school when feasible; help students get back on track to graduate at their projected date; and, prepare students for post secondary life, including further education, work, family, and citizenship.”

One caution regarding comprehensive goals is offered by the evaluators to LEAs developing and refining their ALPs. While it is clear that ALP students have many needs, trying to address all of the needs of (or having many diverse goals for) students in one program may dilute it to such a degree that it becomes less effective than otherwise possible. The role of a strong sense of mission (and an aligned philosophy) should provide a program focus that maximizes student success.

Strong Leadership and Staff

Caring and Committed Staff. The presence of caring and committed administrators, faculty and staff was repeatedly mentioned as a critical element in program success. As one student put it, “It makes me feel pretty good knowing that there are people who take time to help me do something or pass something. I am learning. Here it is quieter (than in regular school), and teachers can say, ‘how are you doing?’ and give you help if you need it.” In pointing out differences between regular school and a particular alternative program, one student said, “...the teachers are different. They care and try to help, even with problems at home; ...students can develop a real friendship relationship, and they have a sense of humor...every once in awhile you just have to laugh.” An agency representative in one community noted that it is the teaching staff that makes the program special. He said, “They bond with kids, support them during difficult times, and are sincere. Kids recognize sincerity.”

Often teachers go the extra mile on behalf of students. As one example, students have staff with them as advocates during court proceedings or when they are with probation officials. In another example, a teacher was recognized for using her Sunday afternoons to make home visits to keep parents informed about their child’s progress and to provide needed support to parents. Almost universally, staff members at the alternative programs visited said they work at these programs because they “want to be here.” Furthermore, many said, they don’t want to be anywhere else. Understanding of their students, and an empathy for them, was expressed in many ways from

program to program. A staff member at one program said, "I have always had a place in my heart for these kinds of young people. I was probably one of them."

Dynamic Leaders. "Dynamic" is a term often used to describe the persons who provide leadership and direction to successful alternative education programs. One leader was lauded by staff, parents, and community representatives alike for a high level of enthusiasm and commitment to program success. Administrators and staff in another program pointed to the "dynamic enthusiasm and commitment" of the its leader as the central element that enables the program to address its primary mission and associated goals.

Leadership is recognized as an important aspect for all successful schools and organizations; the same is true for alternative programs. However, ALPs must seek to expand the notion of leadership to many people and to institutionalize its program in order to ensure continuation of effective programs when a leaders moves on.

Collegiality - with faculty and students. Another characteristic that most programs seem to share is the presence of a high degree of cohesion and collegiality among faculty and an interrelationship that facilitates students getting help from everyone in the school. One teacher described her colleagues as "a caring faculty who can talk together." Such collegiality is likely facilitated by the typically smaller size of programs. However, it also seems to result from the type of staff attracted to these programs and the need to work closely together to provide success for the students.

A superintendent commenting on the importance and uniqueness of particular people in these programs, said, "You can't buy these people--you have to find them."

Family-Like Atmosphere of Respect

Closely related to staff collegiality is the relationship among staff and students. Some programs could be said to illustrate staff/student cohesion; staff and students respect each other. One teacher, indicating the respect he holds for his students, said, "Any teacher would be privileged and honored to have these students. They give so much. They are like a family."

At one program, many activities take place that are meant to bring the group together and foster a family like atmosphere. Creating a sense of belonging is an important priority in the classroom. At times during the day there are group meeting around a big table; sometimes the discussions are necessary to process inappropriate behavior and other time academic work is conducted in small groups. But it is an interaction based on respect, as well as structured interventions.

At another program, both students and parents noted that their attitudes toward school had changed markedly, attributing these changes to the "friendliness" and "family-like atmosphere" of the school. Most had praise for their teachers and their "welcoming spirit." Students at still another program emphasize the family atmosphere that is present, that staff members are like parents in that they sit down with students to talk and listen. They point to "learning together," "no two days are alike," and "educational trips" as examples of why the program works for them. Still other students, in confirming the experience of students at these sites, said, "It's like a family--students argue, but they have fun."

Student-Focused Interventions

These ALPs were characterized by focused learning that is built around the needs of individual students.

Smaller is better. Small size facilitates the effectiveness of learning and counseling for these students. While not all of the programs are small, teaching units typically are. And the largest program was focused on short-term interventions for suspended students – a program not designed to foster long-term success. Smaller size overall, however, is more likely to lead to sustained focus on student needs, to allow for variation of instruction for student needs and styles, and to allow follow-up when students are returned to the home school or go to some other option. A parent at one program remarked, "(This program) is different because the class sizes are smaller, the children get closer attention, and they work in smaller groups. It is a better environment generally, especially for a student with a learning disability or an attention problem like my son...They care here and take the time."

Individualized and “Hands-on”. Learning in these programs was more “active” and individualized than is typical in regular middle and high schools - strategies often shown to work better for at-risk learners. Staff members at several sites spoke to the importance of active learning on the part of students, something most did not experience in regular schools. A number of teachers expressed their strong belief that “...kids learn best when their interest is engaged--when they are doing things.” Said one student, “Kids here do just as much work, but at a different rate. Teachers don’t push students until they’re overwhelmed. There are no groups and students are not categorized. We actually look forward to getting up and coming. The key word here is *personalized*.”

Another student described the purpose of his program as “...to give people a chance. There is more freedom for students like the ones with ADD and ADHD who are not ‘sit still, be quiet’ types of kids. It’s different from regular school because students aren’t pushed beyond their limits, as long as they are working. In regular school, if kids get behind, they get kicked out.” Students at other programs the observers visited voiced similar sentiments.

Addressing the “Whole” Child. Most of these programs are designed to address the emotional and physical, as well as the academic, needs of the students. Opportunities for in-depth counseling of students both within and outside the classroom were noted as special features of one program. Another program builds in time each day for group discussion of specific student difficulties in social skills, making good decision, and the like. Often staff work after-hours to find needed resources, follow-up with students and parents, and link students to other services. As is reflected in the ‘philosophy’ statements, the program staff recognize the need to address many areas in the students; lives if they are to be able to succeed.

Flexibility with High Standards: The Ultimate Challenge

Staff and administrators emphasized the concept that alternative programs must be flexible in almost every way across virtually all of the sites visited. Small enrollments, availability of extra counseling from teachers, adoption of different teaching techniques, and the flexible use of time are seen as unique, but necessary features of alternative learning programs. Still, flexibility does not mean that programs can be lax about the learning standards. While students may have more or variable time, may learn in different ways, and have other types of flexibility, successful programs maintain high academic and behavioral standards. Conversely, flexibility is more likely to allow programs to meet these standards with students who were not successful in the regular programs.

Continuous change, in order to strengthen the probability of attaining program goals (without wholesale revision of purpose or scope) underscored, at least in part, what flexibility means to one program. Students at several sites noted that they have choices, that “you can do it your own way,” but that standards are high. A teacher observed that “We (the staff) want the children to ‘own’ the program. We make changes as we go along, if some things don’t work, (but) we do have rules and regulations--this is not play time.”

ALPs must maintain the focus on academic standards, within the context of individual needs. If students do not pass grades and/or courses, if they do not do well of state assessments, they are not going to graduate from high school. Addressing social and emotional needs must be part of getting students to successfully meet the academic milestones of school and to learn the essential knowledge and skills for later success. However, these needs must never be an ultimate excuse for students *not* meeting standards. This challenge is why alternative educators must be especially committed people. Regular education was not successful with these students; that is why these programs are called “alternative.” It requires “better-than-average” staff.

Creative Strategies for Course Offerings

Due to their typically small size, ALPs often are unable to provide a full course selection within the bounds of the program. Staffs are not certified in all subject areas and ancillary course of interest to students. Although a number of programs do not have a full complement of teachers certified in core academic areas or facilities such as labs for some course instruction, most frequently these courses include subjects as foreign language, performing or fine arts, and vocational courses. Other than sending students to the home schools for these courses, a strategy many ALP students do not like, some ALPs have become creative in finding ways to offer such courses. One such strategy is contracting for part-time teachers (see next section).

Many programs maintain working relationships with community colleges and universities that provide courses that otherwise might not be available to students in the programs. For some students, dual enrollment arrangements can be made through which students earn high school and college/community college credits concurrently. In one program, a local university made their lab rooms available for science instruction.

Strong Community Connections

Several programs stressed their attempts to establish strong connections with a variety of community organizations and agencies, both public and private. In so doing, the programs often obtain participation of volunteers, financial and/or non-monetary contributions, and, most importantly for the staff, a greater understanding in the community at large about their alternative program and who the students really are.

Among public agencies most often involved with the programs are local Departments of Social Services, the State Division of Youth Services, local law enforcement agencies, juvenile probation officers, and local jobs training coordinators. Civic clubs and private business are frequently a source of support for alternative programs, providing volunteers and financial resources for designated purposes. One program has established connections with such diverse groups as the Women's Club, senior citizens homes, a civic club, a cerebral palsy center, and another alternative program

Some also offer students an opportunity to learn more about the working world through student visits to local businesses. On occasion, these connections have afforded students opportunities to interact with the community in a volunteer and service capacity. In return, individuals in the community have developed a high level of respect for staff members at the programs and for students, too.

BRIGHT IDEAS

In addition to the promising practices listed above which are found at more than two, and often at many alternative program sites, observers noted some practices or features unique to one or two sites. These practices, although found in a limited number of programs currently, seem to offer a compelling benefit for the students in the program. They may be of interest for purposes of adaptation or replication by other alternative education programs.

Service Learning

All students participate in once-a-week activities designed to integrate them into the larger community through the provision of meaningful volunteer work. Students are divided into small groups (usually numbering between five and seven), each of which is directed by a member of the school's staff. They participate in such diverse activities as visiting nursing homes, volunteering in soup kitchens, working with Habitat for Humanity, and tutoring students in elementary schools. Of particular note is the fact that these activities are carried out on a regular, continuing basis, thus allowing students to develop close relationships with a variety of persons in the community.

Identifying and Focusing Resources

At least one program is noteworthy for identifying and using a variety of resources in a calculated manner to underwrite its vision and support its goals. For example, funds from several school district budgets are brought together to pay staff members with different qualifications who together provide a focused instructional and support program for students. Private donations have made special activities possible for students. Volunteers are secured from the community at large and from a near by university to extend the work of the on-going faculty and staff. Community service projects also contribute to learning in a planned way. An imaginative, planned use of these and other resources provides a more comprehensive approach to serving the needs of alternative education students than might otherwise occur.

Contracting Part-Time Teachers

Observers noted two alternative programs that provide expanded instruction and student support through the use of part-time contracts for especially qualified personnel. In one location these are certified teachers who provide individual guidance, grade student work, and answer questions related to academics. At the other program, a vocational teacher is contracted on an hourly basis to teach shop and to work with students on vocational projects; another teacher, certified in science, is contracted on an hourly basis to teach biology after regular school hours; a certified math teacher from the regular school gave up her planning period to teach Algebra I in the program.

Student Directed Learning

While individualized approaches were found at many programs, this program is characterized by student responsibility and direction, under staff supervision. Students are provided copies of the State Standard Course of Study goals and objectives for each of their high school courses. They maintain these goals in their notebooks and determine for themselves which objectives to work on at any given time. Assistance in meeting objectives is provided as needed and the work they do is reviewed by staff. When an objective is reached, the student moves on to the next objective of his or her choice.

Shadow Program

Coordinated by a retired superintendent, this program provides students with opportunities to follow local business people and professionals as they go about their work. The object is for students to become acquainted with the particular business or profession in particular in addition to learning more about the adult working world in general.

Clinical/Team Approach to Behavior Management

A distinguishing feature of one program is its behavior management approach, which is designed to foster a sense of responsibility for personal behavior on the part of each student and encourage the development of self-monitoring skills. The clinical/team approach is used in conjunction with the academic component of the curriculum. Students continually engage with their advisors in a process of goal setting. Individual daily goals for both behavioral performance and academic accomplishment are specified and recorded on a progress sheet which students carry with them each day. Attainment of goals is noted by the school's staff throughout the day, and a point system is used to reward or sanction student behavior and academic performance. As part of the clinical approach, teaching teams meet at the end of every day to discuss each student's progress and problems. Each team is led in these discussions by its counselor, and free exchange of ideas, perspectives, and potential solutions is encouraged. The instructional staff sees these daily conferences as enabling a comprehensive assessment of student progress and student needs.

NEEDS AND ISSUES

During conversations with case study team members, ALP staff, administrators, school board members, parents, students, and community members, expressed what they perceive to be program needs and issues requiring resolution. Following is a summary of needs and issues most often mentioned.

Funding

Since it is an often-expressed need for education in general, it comes as no surprise that many of those interviewed called for additional funding for alternative education programs. Funding is a two-pronged issue. On one hand, many programs cite the need for additional funding to carry out the instruction and services students need. Transportation, if offered at all, for example is very expensive option for few students spread over an entire district. On the other hand, these programs cost more than regular education, and other educators in the district and/or community members express concern and even at times resentment about the per student costs.

One project reported a growing concern within the school system itself and the community in general about the cost of the program. But, program leaders reply, "...those who consider this program an extravagance need only look at cost projections, both present and future, suggesting that without such an intervention, many of the students being served might become drains on the county's economy rather than contributing members of society." Staff members at another site noted the pressures that have arisen because of a reduction in the level of funding by the county commission and because of a local push for school vouchers. While all interviewed remarked on the value of the program, it was acknowledged that translating student success into dollar amounts has not been done.

Improving Public/Political Relationships

Uncertainty, even suspicion, and occasionally hostility regarding alternative education programs was noted by persons interviewed at a number of sites. In addition to matters related to funding outlined in the preceding item, several programs reported that the notions of "we're throwing money at bad kids" or that the programs are somehow less worthy than regular school programs are widely held. Some suggest that there seems to be a lack of understanding in the community at large about the programs and this is a concern that needs to be addressed.

One person said that program needs could best be addressed through developing a system of advocacy from the district superintendent on down. Others take every opportunity they can to inform school board members or involve them in program activities. Although little evidence surfaced that this has occurred yet, suggestions were made that marshalling parents to help support the programs might be productive.

There is a mix of opinions about whether local news media pay any attention to alternative programs (unless something controversial occurs), but several of those interviewed did report that in their communities news media coverage, while not extensive over time, has been positive.

Better Communication and Follow-Up with Other Schools

Inadequate, and sometimes non-existent communication, between alternative programs and regular schools is a concern that was expressed at several sites. The concerns expressed came from both directions. For example, teachers in one community were critical because they got no feedback from program staff when students they referred were not accepted. Without that feedback, they said, they are becoming increasingly confused about the purpose of the program and exactly what the admission criteria are. Consequently, there seem to be some misunderstandings and even inaccurate impressions about the academic and discipline standards for students in the alternative program

Lack of staff resources to follow up with students once they have returned to their home schools or have moved on to other schools is recognized as a deficiency at several sites. "A transitioning bridge is needed," said one administrator, both for personnel at the receiving schools to understand the behavior skills students learned while they were in the program and for program personnel to track the progress of their former students.

At one site, the differences in understandings between the referring schools and the alternative school, as perceived by referring school administrators, appear to undergird their contention that the greatest need is for the alternative school to build and maintain common understandings among all the schools.

Establishment of A Variety of Alternatives

It was emphasized by staff members at several sites that one alternative school model does not meet all needs. A variety of schools and approaches is needed. With only one program available in a school system, a wider range of students are referred than can be dealt with successfully, according to some program staff members. One program director, in suggesting a way to handle this issue, expressed a vision for several alternatives under one roof—one for low academic achievers, one for students with discipline problems, another for English as a Second Language students, and so forth. In another situation, a superintendent, in recognizing problems associated with a program getting too large, expressed a wish to set up multiple alternative programs of the same type throughout the county, separate, but with connections of some sort.

Additional Course Offerings

Personnel and students at many alternative programs spoke of a desire for a broader range of courses than currently available. Although one or two programs have been able to devise ways to extend their curricular offerings, those who have not most often called for courses in the areas of vocational education, the arts, and foreign languages. Note that one of the “Bright Ideas” addressed this issue.

Facility Improvements

A desire for improved facilities or locations was often expressed by persons interviewed in the course of visits. In one county, a more centrally located facility would make services more easily available to all of the district’s students, as well as solve transportation problems--some students, and in a few instances their babies, endure bus rides in excess of three hours per day.

At another location, three-quarters of the physical space within which the program is located has been condemned as unfit for occupancy. Some suggestions have been made for combining the alternative program with some other education-related services which may be a possibility. However, the county school system is fast growing and cannot keep up with the demand for regular schools and so it seems there will be no different space for the alternative program any time soon.

At still another site, the program is located in its own facility, but it was reported that many in the community did not like its location near an elementary school, or its appearance. It was described by some as “Ugly, especially on the outside.” Classrooms and offices located on the second floor are inaccessible to persons with severe physical disabilities.

Frustration was expressed at one program which recently moved into a new facility. While appreciating its newness, staff members pointed out that it was not large enough to accommodate the entire program under one roof, and, thus, they have to use some space in an older, adjoining building. The new building replaces a nearby facility that has been condemned, but, by local policy, a replacement facility cannot be larger than the existing space. Staff members also reported that they were not involved in planning the new facility.

Appropriate Staff Training

Teachers emphasize the need for specially selected professionals for alternative programs. Several teachers interviewed reported that their formal educational preparation was of little or marginal help in preparing them to teach in an alternative school setting. One teacher said she learned more during her first three years of teaching in an alternative school than she did in all of her years in formal education, adding that, “...until you’ve been there, you don’t have a clue.” University training programs for teachers typically do not include methods to deal with severe discipline or therapeutic issues of children like those in most alternative education programs. As one teacher noted, “The most useful classes in universities are taught by professors who still have one foot in the (elementary and secondary) classroom and who know what it’s like to be in the trenches.”

Program-specific professional development that teachers will buy into was described as being needed across the board. Few professional development activities in which many of those interviewed have participated focused on alternative education. “What’s needed for regular teachers may not necessarily be useful for us,” one teacher said. Teachers were complimentary of alternative education conferences, the Teacher Academy, and other activities that tend to draw alternative program teachers from around the state and region together. One teacher summed up what he considers the most useful continuing education received by the faculty this way: “Every day (at the alternative program) is a professional development day!”

ALLEGHANY COUNTY OPTIONS ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM

Sparta Elementary School

BACKGROUND

A Best Practices Case Study was completed for Options Alternative Program in May of 1998. Options serves students in grades 5 – 7 and is housed within the Sparta Elementary School. This is one of three elementary schools in Allegheny County and serves about 560 students in grades PK - 9. The district also has one high school. Sparta Elementary School earned exemplary status in the state's ABCs Accountability Program the previous year and had one of the state's first teachers certified by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards.

The area around Allegheny County has one of the highest illiteracy rates in the state. They also have a growing number of Hispanics who do not speak English and a high rate of teen pregnancy. According to the Assistant Superintendent who was in that position before 1990, there was a cohort of students around 1989 that were particularly difficult. There was no special program in the district for adjudicated minors and the classroom teachers were anxious for some relief. In 1990, the current teacher/administrator of the Options program and the counselor now working with the program wrote a proposal to apply for a competitive grant from the Governor's Crime Commission program to replicate an alternative program for juvenile status offenders in Lexington, which was also known as Options. The grant was originally written for an alternative program at the high school, with a smaller class of more serious cases, which were also involved with the juvenile court system, at Sparta Elementary School.

The district received a grant for \$50,000 annually for two years (some of which was given to the district's high school ALP) and staff were hired, including the teacher and the counselor who wrote the original grant. One of the requirements of the grant was that 65% of the students served be court involved or known to the courts. The third original staff member was hired as a teaching assistant, ignoring her Doctorate in Education as well as her previous position in the District as Head of Curriculum. She had retired from education but was enticed back because of the nature of the program, "but for me, it was the first opportunity ever offered that gave time a priority in working with children, she said. It was an adventure I did not want to miss." (Article in the Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin).

This "teacher assistant's" employment was less than a year, but one year later, she was asked to be the interim Superintendent, and then became the permanent Superintendent until 1997. The current principal of Sparta Elementary School, who has been in that position for 6 years, was also involved in the initiation of the program. Before becoming principal of the elementary school, he was the district superintendent for 14 years. Options had exceptional support from the district administration from 1990 through 1997. After the initial two-year grant ended, the same two staff members wrote grant proposals, including one for a state Intervention/Prevention grant, which was awarded, to continue the initial program.

Since 1997-98, the program struggled with funding problems. Beginning that year, which was also the year of the site visit, several staff members interviewed, both program and non-program, indicated that the new Superintendent and local board of education seemed to be shifting priorities toward providing more support and services to the district's high school alternative learning program (ALP). Still, from a combination of funding sources the Options program at Sparta Elementary has managed to survive.

PHILOSOPHY AND MISSION

Options is designed around the research, philosophy, and methods of Dr. William Glasser's Control Theory and Reality Therapy. The core philosophy is built around the belief that all people need four things for survival: love, freedom, fun, and power. The program was started as a result of a small group of people who believed, and were able to convince other, that as a matter of moral responsibility, every child needs and deserves a good education.

The program's mission statement, which was developed by the students, is as follows:

"[Our mission is to] make our class be a happy, safe, comfortable, caring place where we have love and belonging, power, freedom and fun. We will be respectful, honest, trustworthy, in control [of ourselves], and motivated."

The basic premises of Glasser's Control Theory and Reality Therapy are that all people act through choices that they make, no matter how much they believe they are controlled by outside forces. While traditional forms of discipline focus on the misbehavior and external forms of control, this approach teaches the child a better way to behave and internal forms of control, or self discipline. Disruptive students and poor achievers are taught that they can change their behavior by recognizing that they have a choice of behaviors, that their current behavior may not be achieving anything worthwhile for them, and that there is a way of taking and keeping control over themselves. This is accomplished through the sum of all interactions with the teachers in the Options program. Operating in the moment that it is happening, teachers deal with student behaviors immediately, by going through a series of specific steps teaching problem-solving and decision-making skills through which students are taught to identify their inappropriate behaviors, take responsibility for them, and make specific plans and commitments to change them. This, as with all aspects of the classroom, is conducted in a non-coercive manner, with the teacher modeling and leading the student into appropriate actions.

Students are taught to view problem situations not only from their own perspectives, but also from the perspectives of the "victims" of their actions, and from the perspective of the teacher or counselor who is intervening. Restitution and logical consequences are often used to make amends for their inappropriate behaviors. Rather than merely punishing the child, this approach is used to strengthen the child and teach appropriate behaviors. It is also used to make the child a more responsible member of the group.

Restitution is not retribution. Restitution provides the teacher with a process to redirect the individual. In the restitution model the teacher's actions do not diminish the individual. Rather, the teacher uses restitution as a tool to gain control without sacrificing the self-esteem of the individual. When students understand that the goal of discipline is to strengthen them and to teach them, they are much less likely to be afraid to face their mistakes. They begin to view a problem as an opportunity for learning a better way.

As students learn to approach their problem behavior in these more constructive ways, they are also able to learn to apply these skills to learning and achievement problems. They are more likely to face their academic mistakes with the same honesty and openness and to use these opportunities to improve, both academically and behaviorally. Mastery learning, where students review and refine their work after instruction from the teacher, is another tool utilized to instill intrinsic motivation for academic progress. Students become increasingly interested in asking for assistance before they fail and in asking for opportunities to improve their performance to demonstrate their best work.

Program staff report that it is time intensive to work with students to think through their behavior, identify what is inappropriate and what would be more effective, and generate logical consequences to their actions. Students are required to think about their behavior and discuss it with their parents. Staff help facilitate, generate options, and role-play.

ORGANIZATION, STRUCTURE, AND FUNDING

Sparta Elementary School is a newly renovated facility, much expanded from its original size. Much of the school is new, with colorful walls, floors, and classrooms. The new section is one story and the grade levels PK-8 are arranged in order from one end of the building to the other. At the end of the new building there is a connecting hallway to the old two-story building. This section is dark and not colorful. It houses some specialty classes (e.g., music, Spanish, and the program for academically gifted students), an elementary counselor, and the Options program, found on the second floor of this section. Before the new building was constructed, Options was housed in a trailer behind the school.

The Options program is on a hallway with almost no other activity. The program is housed in two large, connected, classrooms. Entrance to the program is through one of the rooms. The connector has two rooms off of it, one used for an office and the other as a snack room/storage room. The entry room contains a large, rectangular, desk, around which all of the students and staff can sit, and a series of cubicles, one for each student. There is also a sitting area with couch, chairs and a coffee table. The second room is more open. It has a sitting area in one corner (about 1/5 of the room) with couch, chairs and a table. It has two computers along a back wall. They are connected to the Internet. There are shelves along the walls in both rooms.

The walls are covered with artwork and class work prepared by the students, as well as posters related to the functioning and principals of the program, i.e., a poster that lists acceptable behaviors for the students and is signed by each student. One room is quite full (the entry room) and the other room has some open space.

School begins at 8:05 am and ends at 2:40 p.m. A typical day begins with a group check in time during which students have the opportunity to report anything of significance, either positive or negative, to the staff and/or the group. The next hour and a half are spent on communication skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), after which there is a fifteen-minute break. Students then spend no more than one hour in whole- group instruction in social studies, science, or health. Next, students work as a group with specialists in other parts of the building in art, Spanish, or in the computer lab (time varies). Students have a 45-minute physical education class after their thirty-minute lunch period. Literature is usually combined with another subject, such as science or social studies for about 45 minutes, followed by an hour and a half of mathematics instruction.

In its first year of operation, Options served students in grades 6-8. A need was seen to serve younger students and the program changed its criteria to admit students in grades 4-8. That has now been amended again and the program is targeting students in grades 5-7. There is still interest by some in the district in serving younger students in the program. It is the aim of the program by the eighth grade to transition students into regular classes in Sparta Elementary, part-time or full-time, depending on the readiness of each student, so that program staff can still be nearby to support the transition. The program has a capacity of 12 students. At the time of the site visit it had 2 girls and 6 boys, ranging from 13 to 14 years of age and all of the students in the program were white (roughly a reflection of the racial makeup of the county). Program staff, supported by the Sparta Elementary School Principal, try to keep the program as stable as possible. Once a group of students is accepted at the beginning of the year, they try to cap it, except for emergency cases. There is also effort to prevent too much teacher turnover. Stability and trust building are essential elements of the treatment component for the children in the program

Teachers, counselors, and principals in the district's three elementary schools (including the school in which the program is housed), recommend students for the program, as do parents and staff in other community agencies. The staff of Options then meets to decide if the student is suitable for Options. Though staff does not rule out serving students in an exceptional children's program, that is not the primary purpose of the program. After the first two years of the program, the requirement that 65% of the students be court involved was changed so that, while some are still court involved and some are known to law enforcement authorities, the program also targets students with attendance and behavior/discipline problems. These students nearly always have learning and academic problems as well, but those are not their primary problems. Many of the students in the program are from low income, single parent families. They are typically from "dysfunctional families and have survived by manipulating people". Many of the children are also victims of abuse and/or neglect.

Once a child is referred to the program, staff gathers other information as necessary. Home visits are made to explain the program to parents or guardians. They have found that families that want the assistance and involvement of the program staff are those that work and succeed. They listen to families to see how open they are to what the program offers. They usually are "thrilled" the staff wants to work with their child and want to know what they can do to be part of the solution. They find that most of the parents have become "victims" of their children. As program staff members have listened to parents over the years, they have found that the only time these parents have been contacted by regular schools is when their children have done something bad.

Staff then discusses all the students discussed and consider not just the individuals referred, but also the potential dynamics of the group as a whole. After a preliminary decision about admitting the student, the family is contacted to explain the program to them and gain their support and active participation in the program. Students are not admitted without an agreement with the family to actively participate, including home visits from the staff

CBA counselor, who makes these visits on Sunday afternoons. Students are admitted to the program for no less than a year.

In May 1998, the district's finance officer reported that the Options teacher/administrator, certified as an exceptional child teacher, had always been paid from the county's state teacher allotments. Eighty percent of the salary of the CBA counselor's position is paid from county CBA funds (for county alternatives to training school) and twenty percent of her salary comes from local funds. The two half-time male staff persons, one counselor split with the high school and one teacher assistant, are paid from the state allotment of At-Risk Students/Alternative Schools and Programs fund. [The high school ALP, at the time of the visit, was supported totally from state at risk funds: one full-time teacher, at that time uncertified; a full time teacher assistant; and the half-time counselor, already mentioned.]

PROMISING PRACTICES

Faculty Competence, Collaboration and Cohesiveness

The teacher/program administrator is certified as an Exceptional Child teacher. The CBA Counselor has been both an adult probation officer and a juvenile court counselor. She is currently working on her middle grades certification in mathematics. The counselor who is split with the high school is certified in school counseling. Both he and the teacher/program administrator are certified in Glasser's Reality Therapy. The CBA counselor is also working on her certification in reality therapy. That certification requires three separate intensive weeks, plus a 36-hour practicum in between. The half-time teacher assistant was a full-time substitute teacher for the district before being hired to work part-time in the Options program.

The staff, students, and families, all gave evidence of the staff being involved in the lives of the students outside of the classroom. Some students were involved with the court system, either as perpetrators or victims, and the staff is right there with them during court proceedings, with probation requirements and officials, and as advocates. As noted earlier, one staff member uses her Sunday afternoons to make home visits to keep parents informed about their child's progress and to provide needed support to parents. All of the staff is available to families and students outside of school hours.

Student Focused, Individualized Learning Approach

The academic/therapeutic classroom at Options in general provides a safe, secure, and nurturing experience. That extends to academics. Failure in academic work is not considered to be an option. If student work is not determined to be at the level of "quality" or "high quality", students must continue, with the guidance and assistance of the teacher, until their work reaches the level of mastery. Standards of quality are individually applied, depending on the ability of the student. What is quality for one student may not be quality for another. Students are taught to strive for their *personal best* rather than an adopting an attitude that their work is *good enough*. Program staff members continually work with students until they understand what their individual quality standard is for the particular task.

Reading, communication skills, and mathematics are areas of academic emphasis. At the beginning of the year students are individually assessed to determine appropriate working levels. Throughout the year continuous progress is monitored for each student using such assessments as the Individual Reading Inventory and state End-of-Grade testlets. Students are given a lot of choice regarding reading material within their appropriate range of reading levels. The Accelerated Reader is used to test students on books they have read from the library. SRA Kits, phonics word cards, and Blast Off are used with the reading curriculum. Reading fluency is also an area of emphasis. As with all subjects, instruction is sometimes conducted with individuals and sometimes with groups of students. Staff members have a procedure they call "bump and run" that is used throughout the day. They go where they are needed to keep students focused on their work and demonstrating appropriate behavior.

Bibliotherapy is used as both an academic and a therapeutic tool. Books are carefully chosen to help students work through and understand important issues. For this reason, the media specialist has been a helpful resource to program staff. Some books bring about more understanding and closeness than others do. Sometimes the staff reads to the students, sometimes students read. Students are taught to empathize and talk about coping

mechanisms related to situations that may not change. Socratic seminars are utilized to teach higher order thinking skills and to bring all students into the discussions.

In mathematics, state EOC testlets are used starting at grade level. Instruction is more structured in that each child has instruction with one of the staff members. Students can work up or down from grade level, as appropriate for the individual student.

Students are discouraged from saying things that indicate they do not believe they are capable of doing the work. They set their own goals in 9-week plans relating to all aspects of the classroom including behavior and academics and are evaluated against their attainment of those goals. Evidence of student progress is maintained in student portfolios. The program has narrative-style report cards. Instruction is a mixture of individual and group. Students are encouraged to read at home as well as at school. Much of the work of the class is conducted around projects that pull together multiple skills and different areas of the curriculum. There is also an emphasis on the world outside the classroom; current, relevant issues; experiential learning; and includes some trips outside the classroom.

There are many activities that are meant to bring the group together and foster a family like atmosphere. Creating a sense of "belonging" is an important priority in the classroom. At times during the day, when appropriate, there are group meetings around the big table. Sometimes the discussions are necessary to process inappropriate behavior and other times academic work is conducted in small groups. If at the end of the day an issue is not totally resolved in an appropriate manner, staff members stay after school with the student and work with him or her until the matter is resolved and then take them home. Trust and confidentiality are number one with the child and then with the family.

While the visit was being conducted a student, teacher and parent, were dealing with an incident in which the student had shown disrespect for an assistant principal through a hand gesture. The student was being asked to come up with something that would make amends for his actions. Initially he had suggested things that were not very important to him (no PE, not riding the school bus). However, these consequences were not acceptable. Instead, he was instructed to come up with some that were more logically related to his offense. His teacher and mother helped him generate a list of possibilities. He finally chose making an apology to the assistant principal in writing and delivering that in person.

Family involvement is an important aspect of the Options program. The CBA Counselor on staff provides instruction and makes visits to the homes of every student in the class. These visits are a chance to bring the parents up to date on the progress of their child in school. In addition, they provide an opportunity to give guidance to the parents so that they can act at home in a manner that is consistent with the way the students are worked with in school. She is also available to assist with other parenting issues as requested. During these family visits, the counselor assesses any needs the family has which might involve other agencies. If such referrals are in order, she helps them complete complicated forms to access needed services.

Twice a year there is an awards ceremony during which students are recognized, the program is promoted, and families get a chance to talk to each other and the staff. The case study evaluation team attended one of these awards ceremonies. A simple buffet dinner was provided in the school cafeteria and students performed for the group, demonstrating special accomplishments. Each student was acknowledged with an award in some way, and the accomplishments of the program as a whole were discussed.

Several promising practices were noted in the area of transition support. (1) The openness of teachers at Sparta Elementary School to incremental transition of Options students into regular classes provides each child a safety net. The Options staff is nearby to call on, if necessary. (2) Although the program would benefit from the counselor being with them full time, having that person half time at the high school for transition support when students get there is a good "next best thing". While in the Options program the students have already developed a strong, trusting relationship with him and he has come to know their families well. His being available to them for support and assistance is helpful. (3) The Success 101 first period elective course implemented by the high school principal for at-risk students like those served in the Options program is a good idea. Academic tutoring, homework assistance, personal support, and assistance with problem solving, decision-making, planning, and conflict resolution are all helpful transition support services for students.

Because of the differences in the high school alternative program, not every Options student who is promoted to high school is referred to that program. The principal said that he saw a need to provide extra support to students coming into high school from the Options program because the high school is large and much more structured than Options. He implemented a first period elective course for these students called *Success 101*. The teacher in the class would meet whatever need each student had to get the day off to a good start, whether the need was academic tutoring or a private discussion of a family problem. The principal reported that he also convinced the Superintendent to let him hire the Options counselor half time so that he could provide additional support to Options students who are making the transition into high school.

The observed interaction between staff and students was much as described in print material about the program. The program is avowedly a combination academic/therapeutic program, and the interactions with staff have at least as much behavioral as academic content. While students conducted academic activities, the conversation was regularly about making choices, understanding those choices and their consequences, and taking responsibility for those choices. Many of these students have been abused and/or neglected. One or both parents have abandoned some. Stability and trust building are essential elements of the treatment component for the children in the program. Small class size, a strong emphasis on building positive relationships, and timely interventions with appropriate restitution are critical to program success with individual students.

Although the parents of many of the Options do not feel comfortable at school because of their own lack of success in school, the one thing that brings them out is a chance to see their child perform and receive recognition. The Awards Banquet, while providing a simple meal and ceremony, is a powerful experience for all involved. There are culminating demonstrations of what the children have learned, recognition for both academic and behavioral progress for individuals and the group as a whole, and opportunities for parents to talk to Options staff and get to know each other better. Collections of work are available for parents to view and ask questions about in student portfolios, which are considered the property of the students. This event is a strong incentive for students and they work hard to prepare for it

Community Connections

Options staff has done an excellent job of identifying and pulling other community resources into the program to help students and strengthen their family supports. There is a great deal of support for the program from these community groups. Among them are the following:

Governor's One-on-One Program. The Governor's One-on-One Program was started in Allegheny County in 1986. This program has been an important resource to Options students. As of May 1998, 20 Options students had been served in the program. Volunteers in the program include such people as a postmaster, a retired clinical social worker, a banker, and a retired nurse. They are all well educated and good role models for youth. The volunteers are recruited and screened (background check) and, when appropriate, references are obtained from their employers. They are trained after being approved by the local board of education. The volunteer meets with the student four hours a week for a total of about sixteen hours a month. The main goals of the program are to provide the child a safe place after school, to engage the child in community service, and to provide educational experiences for the child. The volunteer emphasizes that school is the child's "job". In community service, the child learns that they have chores to do, also. The volunteer engages the child in fun experiences; establish a relationship in which the children feel safe to vent and to be themselves.

Volunteers work with Options staff to identify each child's academic and other strengths and needs. Both programs work together on common goals with the students. The types of children that are linked typically are referred by law enforcement and juvenile court because they are runaways, committed property crimes, have truancy problems, are pregnant, or have problems lying and/or stealing. Most of the Options students linked come from low income, dysfunctional families, and either have single parents or have been abandoned.

Random Acts of Kindness. This California-based program has been operating for about four years in Allegheny County. The program works with youth ages 7 – 17 years old through nurturing, mentoring, and educational skills. The Options class helped the director of the program identify what kinds of people and what acts of kindness to recognize. The students also hosted a recognition program for the program. The director of the

program said that she tries to involve the entire class and to reinforce their sense of responsibility, for themselves and for their community at large. She said she had found with the Options students that we “expect the best of them and they perform.”

Alleghany Connection (through the NC Department of Health and Human Resources, Youth Services Division). This program is located downstairs from the Options program. It focuses on students in grades 3-6. There are about 64 such programs in the state. The program accepts students for a maximum of two years and work with them to reprogram learning and behavioral patterns that are not constructive. The program administrator reported that they find the younger the child, the better their chance of breaking destructive patterns. The program attempts to reach as many children as possible and works with eight new children at all times. Some of the Options students are or have been in the program. In addition, the program administrator goes up to visit the Options students from time-to-time.

Former LEA Superintendent/Options Teacher Assistant. When interviewed about the Options program, the former district superintendent who had also worked as an Options staff member said of the students in the Options program, “When you have been kicked, you have to learn how to bounce... That’s what the Options program teaches these children.” When asked what children need who are like those served by the Options program, she said, (1) The family visits are key. (2) We must provide training to people who touch the lives of children like these. If they have turned out negative, we must find the ways to turn them around. (3) Programs like Options need an added dimension. They need an Executive Board to provide visibility and perform public relations functions and to serve in an advocacy role for the children and the programs. She said there is a great need to connect the services in the community to the school. She said we need to educate people about what services exist, how they are connected, and how to access them.

Department of Social Services/Child Protective Services. Representatives from this community agency said they would probably get involved with more families if Options did not exist. They reported they often refer parents to the program either when they see the need during assessments to determine eligibility for welfare or when doing investigations for abuse or neglect. When asked what made the program work, they said that Options staff members (1) develop strong, trusting relationships with these children, (2) have more interaction with the children and give them more positive attention than these children would receive in a regular classroom and usually more than they get at home, (3) make home visits, help parents with parenting issues and other needs, (4) have class meetings when there are disagreements, which teaches these children needed skills.

D. Student and Parent Opinions

Student Opinions about Options. When asked what they like about Options and how it was different from regular school, students made the following comments:

- *Options teachers can give help when we need it.*
- *I like working in teams and small groups.*
- *We don’t just sit around. We are always busy.*
- *We get to make a lot of choices.*
- *Even when we have family problems, we can get help from the teachers.*
- *Before I came to Options, I hated school. Now I understand more about the way school is, how to make friends, and how to control my temper*
- *People here don’t shun you. They help you.*
- *The teachers are like family.*
- *Teachers will listen to you. In my other school, I would tell teachers something and they would forget it.*
- *We get more attention from teachers here because there are fewer students.*
- *Options teachers are cool. They aren’t stuck up.*
- *Students help each other*
- *Before I came to Options I was out of school a lot, made bad grades and didn’t understand the work. In Options, teachers explain the work to me. They call and check on me if I am absent and come and pick me up if necessary. If I don’t finish my work in class, I can make it up. In my other school, when*

- I came back to school after being out, I was sent to another room to make up the work I missed. While I was in the other room, I was missing what was going on with my class, so I was still behind.*
- *Whenever somebody gets in a fight, we stop and talk about it. We learn to keep cool and to be honest, respectful, and responsible. We learn to use words instead of actions to solve problems.*
 - *My father has a bad temper and he's real strict. My Options teachers helped me learn how to talk to him. Now he's not so bad.*
 - *In my other school when I had trouble learning, teachers told me I had to figure it out myself. They wouldn't stop and help me. In Options I have learned to read faster and they are helping me with my math. I have learned how to keep myself calm. I've learned that I can help others. Students help each other.*

When asked their least favorite things about Options, students made the following comments:

- *At the beginning of the year we had a fight nearly every day. I didn't like that. But we learned why the fight happened. The whole class talked about it and we each talked about our feelings, even when it was someone else who got in the fight. We learned how to prevent ourselves from getting in fights. In my other school you just get sent to the office if you get in a fight.*
- *We don't get to see our friends at the other school.*
- *People think we don't work. We work just as much as students in other classes and we are learning.*

Parents Opinions about Options. There was an opportunity to talk to all of the parents of the students in Options during an awards presentation one evening in the school's cafeteria. All of the parents were very enthusiastic about the program. The parents credit Options with improving the behavior and academic performance of their children. Most mentioned improvements in reading or mathematics, whichever was their child's greatest problem upon entering the program. They reported that their children have been "saved" by the program, that they were not attending school or attending to school, but now were more eager to go to school, and had a good chance of success with the academic and behavioral skills that they were given at Options.

All of them also report a high level of involvement with the program. Of course, the program comes to them every week in the form of a home visit, but they felt they knew what was happening with their children, and liked that they got reports so regularly.

One parent said that she wished a program such as Options had existed when she went to school. She said she never did well in math in school. Although she liked the subject, she said her teachers never took the time to explain things to her so that she understood...they just passed her on from year to year. She graduated with a high school diploma, but still does not understand multiplication and division. She said she has been passed over for at least two better paying jobs because of this deficiency and she is still disappointed because she was not allowed to reach her full potential in school, and not in life. Both she and her husband strongly agreed that they want a better life for their child, and that Options is helping that dream come true.

EXPRESSED ISSUES AND NEEDS

Modifications in Program Administration

More Emphasis on Academics. The principal of Sparta Elementary School reported that two to three years ago many were concerned that there was too much emphasis in the program and not enough emphasis on academics. He said that has changed and that there is more of a balance between the two. However, the Options teacher/program administrator reported that a significant number of people still think the focus on academics needs to be strengthened even more. She said that is one of the reasons the CBA counselor is working on certification in mathematics. She said the program staff members are working on specific ideas to increase academic emphasis the following year. The program administrator is the only certified teacher and her time is split between teaching and administrative duties. The therapeutic and discipline skills of the other staff members are critical to success with

these students. However, those who design and implement alternative education programs should never have to choose between therapeutic skills and the skills of teaching staff who are highly competent in content and methodology needed to teach students with diverse needs. These programs need both.

Dedicated Funding of ALPs. The principal of Sparta Elementary School said that he thinks dedicated funding of ALPs is necessary for the state at-risk funds to reach the intended programs. The high school principal said that a cut in at-risk funds meant that he had to take away from his ALP in order to offer summer school. He said he thinks it is important for us to pay attention to the funding of ALPs because they do “save children” while at the same time allowing regular classroom teachers to better meet the needs of other students. The district finance officer said the state’s consolidation of several funding streams into one, the At-Risk Student Services / Alternative Schools and Programs Fund, was a positive move because it gave districts more flexibility in the use of those funds. However, she said the cut in Allegheny County’s allotment was not helpful. Apparently this district and a few others were allotted too much money one year and had to repay the money over the course of four years, losing ten percent each year from the previous year’s allocation.

Significant Parent Involvement and Commitment. In order help these children reach their academic potential, there must be significant involvement with their parents in their education. Further, these parents and guardians often need to be open to learning more effective methods of communication and discipline.
Maintaining/Fostering Effective Political Relationships

Maintaining/Fostering Effective Political Relationships

Struggle for Support of the Program. Until 1997-98, Options was operating with fairly strong support. However, there reportedly is growing concern regarding the cost of the program. Specifically, some regular classroom teachers complained about the program having two full-time and two half time staff available for such a small number of students. They also complained because the program did not admit more students after the beginning of the year. At the same time, these teachers said they could not manage the needs of these students in their classrooms. Further, they thought it would be unfair to include state test scores for these students in their accountability results. The LEA Superintendent reported that he wanted assurance of the value of every program in the district. He had been collecting information on Options on his own as well as relying on reports from other district staff. It was also reported that at least one of the local board members had consistently expressed the view that the program is “extravagant”. Numerous people interviewed, both from the schools and the community, reported that the entire county seemed to be split on the issue of providing alternative education for at-risk students. Some saw it as an economic investment for the future success of the county, while others did not want to “throw good money at bad kids”.

Cost Effectiveness. The target student population for this program is seriously at risk of academic failure, social/emotional problems, and involvement in juvenile crime. Helping these children and their families turn their circumstances around into more successful directions takes intensive interventions. Even those who considered the Options program expensive admitted that students like those in the program would never receive the help they need in larger regular classes. Because of the severity of the students’ needs, a minimum of one year in the program is a realistic requirement. It has taken years of harmful circumstances and experiences to produce the needs these children have. Turning their lives around will not happen quickly or on someone else’s timetable. It will take time and skillful, caring deliberate action. Those who consider this program an extravagance need only look at cost projections, both present and future, without such an intervention as many become drains on the county’s economy (e.g., welfare, jail, mental health facilities) rather than contributing members of society. Further, without intervention, when these children are adults, their children will likely repeat the cycle. Beyond the cost in dollars, the loss of human potential is not quantifiable.

Improving Coordination with Other Schools

More Feedback to Referring Teachers. A number of teachers expressed criticism because they got no feedback from program staff when students they referred to the program were not accepted. Without that feedback, teachers reported being increasingly confused about the purpose of the program and exactly what the admission criteria are.

Regular Students and Classroom Teachers Need More. When contrasting their own classroom circumstances to what they perceive to be those of the Options program, teachers expressed a number of other concerns. While some things were criticisms of the Options program, as the discussion progressed, teachers seemed to be expressing frustrations about not being able to take the time necessary to meet the needs of some of the children in their classrooms. (1) The Title 1 Pre-School has fifteen students whom teachers viewed as being at-risk in many of the same ways as the Options students. They were concerned because the Options program has a counselor and the Title 1 Pre-School does not. They said, “the families of these students need counseling too.” (2) The program needs to start with younger students. (3) Some teachers expressed a desire to know more about how the Options staff disciplined students. They said they do not have the same rules as the rest of the school. They reported having observed Options students coming into the cafeteria using bad language and that they understand that Options students are not suspended. (4) Teachers said that, “regular students are doing their work and not being served well. Classes are large and teachers do not have these children 24 hours a day.” For these reasons, teachers argued, “they cannot be held accountable for them,” but they are [by the state]. (5) Teachers said they need one teacher assistant per grade level to rotate among teachers. They also said that, “severe students should not all be placed in regular classrooms.” (6) They want to give administrative work back to administrators and let teachers teach. (7) Teachers said, “if the state would lay off on testing, teachers could get to know students better and help more students”. Now, they say, “We spend too much time cramming and preparing for state tests.”

Understanding How Options Works and Severity of Student Needs. Options staff reported that it was rare to have a visit from any central administration staff. Teachers and principals from other schools do not visit either. With few exceptions, teachers from the school in which Options is housed do not visit the program. Options staff members say that many who criticize the program do so without understanding the nature and severity of the needs of the children or the way the program operates. Even one of the students interviewed said that before he came into the program he thought Options students did no work and that all they did was go on trips and goof off. He said once he enrolled, he found out just how hard everyone works. Staff members wonder if others might change their views if they came to visit and learn.

Enhanced Education and Training

Theory and Research-Based Design. The design of the program and training of staff in a specific therapeutic intervention--Control Theory, Reality Therapy, and mastery learning—is an important characteristic of this alternative education program. University training programs for teachers typically do not include methods to address severe discipline or therapeutic issues needed to address the needs of children like those in the Options program.

BRUNSWICK LEARNING CENTER

BACKGROUND

Brunswick Learning Center (BLC), in its sixth year of operation, serves at-risk students at both middle and secondary school levels. At its inception, the school enrolled students in grades nine through twelve but has gradually expanded its scope. Three years ago, students in grades seven and eight were added to the program, while the past year saw the addition of a sixth grade component. Begun with a \$487,000 Intervention/Prevention grant and continued with a \$500,000/5-year federal grant for the parenting program, the Center has remained under the direction of its founding principal, Robert Rhyne. Brunswick Learning Center serves long-term suspended, previously hospitalized, court-involved, training-school-released, truant, or otherwise "troubled" special needs children. Approximately 80% of students are referred to Brunswick Learning Center because of drug/alcohol related abuses. Student enrollment in May, 1999, numbered 122.

BLC received a Governor's Entrepreneurial School Award in 1977, one of only 10 schools in North Carolina to be so honored, and the only alternative school among the award recipients.

Although Brunswick Learning Center's membership fluctuates, the May, 1999 enrollment represented 1.3% of the total student population in Brunswick County. Last year, 20 seniors graduated; seventy students have graduated in the last 4 years of operation. Midyear, 8 to 10 students, a higher number than usual, returned to regular school; at the end of the 1998-99 year, from 7 to 10 will return. Return is not voluntary, and it is a difficult task, according to teachers and administrators, to convince students that it is in their best interest to return to regular school.

In 1999, Brunswick County had a system membership of 9,737, more than 72% of whom were White, approximately 25% of whom were Black, and almost 2% of whom were Hispanic, with the remainder representing other minorities. According to the Superintendent, there is an approximate 60%/40% split between Caucasian and minority populations at BLC which is somewhat similar to the county as a whole. Student membership in Brunswick County appears to have a history of slow but steady growth, increasing by about 200 students per year.

The average teacher salary supplement from Brunswick County's local funds is \$429 above the average State supplement of \$1,078. Per pupil expenditure also exceeds the State average of \$1,268 by \$284 per student. Within the county as a whole, 46.4% of all students were eligible for free or reduced lunches in 1998-99, compared with 39% at the State level. The average daily attendance in 1998-99 almost equaled the State average of 94.8%. Violent incidents per 1,000 students in 1997-98 numbered 10.4 compared with 6.3 at the State level. At 3.2 overall, the county's dropout rate in 1997-98 was below the State rate of 4.9. In 1999, 47.4% of Brunswick County's students took the Scholastic Aptitude Test scoring a mean of 951 which was slightly below a mean score of 986 for all of North Carolina's students. The number of students from Brunswick County who took the SAT was also proportionately lower than the State's 61%.

PHILOSOPHY AND MISSION

The school's mission statement succinctly defines its purpose as "...providing an opportunity for each student to gain the skills needed to function effectively in the world at large." This vision is predicated upon the belief that all adolescents and young adults have the ability to learn. In tandem with this belief is an articulated mission that envisions the school working with the community to promote learning; nurturing commitment, productivity, service, and citizenship; and perceiving students as a community of independent learners focused on becoming self-sufficient in a changing world.

Goals and objectives for the school center around the overarching purpose of providing flexible educational opportunities and activities that will meet the individual needs of students. Opportunities are designed to help students (a) improve basic academic skills; (b) improve communication skills; (c) work toward high school

graduation and successful completion of requirements for a diploma; (d) accept responsibility for their own behavior; and (e) develop a positive sense of self.

Pervading the mission, and philosophy of the program is the shared recognition that enrollment in BLC represents a last chance for students to receive a public education in Brunswick County. This is strongly emphasized to both students and their parents.

ORGANIZATION, STRUCTURE, AND FUNDING

Brunswick Learning Center (BLC) is located in a renovated older school building in the town of Southport on North Carolina's coast. Its location at one end of the county poses challenges for transporting students, many of whom reside up to 45 miles from the school. Four regional school bus routes provide service to the school from designated attendance area stops. It is the responsibility of the student to arrive in a timely manner at the area pick-up spot.

Administered as a separate school within the county, the Center employs two counselors, fourteen teaching faculty, and two special education teachers in addition to the principal, assistant principal, and support staff. All teachers are licensed in the instructional areas in which they teach. According to the principal, many of the center's salaries are paid through PRC 07, the support code used primarily to fund guidance counselors, social workers, and other professional support staff. An annual golf tournament nets almost \$7,000, and the Center is actively involved in grant writing. After the first two years of grant funding, the Assistant Superintendent became a key administrative liaison who actively participated in making sure the school's financial needs were met.

The interior decor of the facility instills a sense of school pride and spirit with walls and floor coverings tastefully coordinated in the school's colors (purple and gold). Hallways, classrooms, and outdoor areas feature student writings, creative projects, noteworthy accomplishments, and drawings. Outside of the building, the grounds are filled with projects of pride and interest. A rustic cobblestone walkway is currently being constructed to surround the greenhouse area where award-winning Bonsai sculptures are grown for profit and display. Adjacent to the planned mini-park, the school boasts a computer lab with one laptop and 12 IBM computers, each of which is internet accessible. Students make extensive use of computer facilities and associated software in their work on individual projects. What the older physical facility lacks is more than supplemented by the sense of community pride and enthusiasm exuded by faculty, staff, and students.

The school's curriculum is offered on a 4x4 block schedule which is consistent with the structure at other schools in the district although the principal and faculty have requested permission to operate year-round instead. Faculty members are somewhat adamant that brain research is totally in opposition to the 4x4 schedule, especially for at-risk kids. Attention spans are short, they say, and the school must be allowed to adjust curriculum and scheduling based on student needs rather than system-wide consistency. Teaching in an alternative setting is such an intense daily task that teachers feel they need intermittent breaks from school in order to re-energize. A year-round schedule would accommodate that need.

The typical school day begins with students' homeroom sessions from 8:40 to 9:00 a.m. This is followed by two scheduled instructional blocks of one and one-quarter hours each. Third block and lunch periods span the noon hour from 11:35 to 1:00 p.m. During this time, middle school and high school students eat lunch at staggered intervals. Lunch is served in a large classroom-type area with tables and chairs. Food is catered to a portable server with the words "campus cuisine" displayed on its front.

A fourth instructional block is offered in the early afternoon with dismissal at 2:20 p.m. This schedule is modified on Fridays, with four instructional periods of approximately 45 minutes each offered in the mornings. Two hours devoted to exploratory courses that provide a "fun time" of discovery and enlightenment are featured for elective credit on Friday afternoons. Exploratory courses are limited to small groups of students (usually 7 or 8) and include such diverse activities as photography, Bonsai, local history, a basketball clinic, boat building, and sewing. The opportunity to participate in these activities is contingent upon students' good behavior during the week. Those

who need to make up missed time have the opportunity to attend monitored study hall at the same time as the electives.

A unique feature of the program at Brunswick Learning Center is its Teen Family Development Program (TFDP) which provides an opportunity for pregnant and parenting students in the district to keep on track with their educational progress. The goals of TFDP are to prevent 2nd and 3rd pregnancies, to make it possible for pregnant teens and teen mothers to graduate from high school, and to teach parenting and life skills. From first confirmation of pregnancy, students are referred and their needs assessed. About one half have been found to be estranged from their own mothers and, therefore, need nurturing skills themselves. Transportation is provided for moms and children to doctors appointments, Medicaid conferences, etc.; homebound services and extra academic help are available when needed. Twenty-five high school students are currently enrolled in the Teen Family Development Program which is collaboratively funded by an array of public and private agencies and foundations. They include the North Carolina's Department of Social Services, the Department of Environmental Health and Natural Resources, the regional United Way, the BellSouth Foundation, East Carolina University, and the Brunswick School System itself. A teen parent coordinator, counselor, and other support staff maintain the safe and efficient operation of the Teen Parenting Center. Staff associated with the program ensure close linkage between the student, her family, and appropriate community resources and supports.

A child care center that holds a AA license to serve 29 children and is located on the grounds of the Learning Center provides day care and instructional opportunities for teen moms and dads enrolled in the program. Parents are encouraged to visit their youngsters whenever possible, and they take part together in an elective curriculum that includes the how to's of child care, good health and nutrition practices for family and child, nurturing skills, child development, and discipline. The child care center provides a hands-on opportunity to both learn and practice good parenting skills. It is run by an independently licensed daycare provider but partially supported by subsidies for indigent families available through the Department of Social Services. Other needs are dependent upon grant funding. The center receives no Smart Start money, but one salary is paid by Partnerships for Children. In May, 1999, there were 12 babies and 14 toddlers enrolled with 1 director, 7 workers, and 4 volunteers. Workers described the center as "wonderful!"

Brunswick Learning Center's Court Appointed and Probationary Status (CAPS) Program is a second unique aspect of the school's program. Begun in 1995, this behavior modification and early intervention program works closely with both juvenile and adult courts and probation offices in an effort to ensure effective diversion from the judicial system for youth who are under court supervision. CAPS supplements the school's academic component by affording opportunities for enhancement of self-esteem, learning and observing the relationship between actions and their consequences, and enabling access in an integrated fashion to the appropriate community resources and supports that can serve to increase the possibility of successful intervention.

Students are placed on daily point systems--given a 1 or a 0 for each class based on the premise that they "either do it or they don't." If they are not successful in one class, they can start over in the next; i.e., a 0 in one class does not reflect the entire day's work. Judges ask in each case to see the point sheet which indicates whether or not the student has been working and cooperative. Points assist the courts in determining what happens next. In addition, all students have an advisor/advisee session each morning. At the time of the State Evaluation Team's visit, there were 20 students enrolled in the CAPS program. The Director of CAPS describes the program as a "powerful tool" that makes a real connection between probation and school.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Information obtained in the course of interviews with program administrators and instructional staff pointed to the dynamic enthusiasm and commitment of BLC's leadership as the central element that enables the program to address its primary mission and associated goals. In the words of one teacher, the Center is characterized by "efficient flexibility" and an atmosphere in which teachers are able to establish a personal connection with students so that they receive constant positive reinforcement.

Shared Philosophy and Approach

The school's atmosphere was cited as a major contributor to student success. Both students and parents noted that their attitudes toward school had changed markedly. Most felt that students were learning more, and cited the "friendliness" and "family-like" atmosphere of the school as contributors to students' educational development. Many had praise for their teachers and their "welcoming" spirit. As one young mother/student noted, "When I got pregnant I was welcomed, not condemned." The willingness of faculty to work with students in their efforts to master difficult subject matter also was appreciated. In the words of one student, "I don't have to be scared about not doing homework or not understanding the material. Teachers take the time to work individually with students."

Instructional staff varied in their expectations for student outcomes. Several expected the same personal outcomes and behaviors they would from regular education students and/or their own children (e.g., courtesy, goal orientation, and good performance on end-of-course and end-of-grade tests). Other teachers felt it would be unrealistic to expect the same level of performance and outcomes from all students and that demonstration of student effort was a hallmark of success. Virtually all instructional staff agreed that the need for consistency of approach in dealing with students was important. In general, it was felt that the administration provided consistency, although midyear changes in instructional staff to accommodate a fluctuating student enrollment were cited as inhibitors to student success.

Student Focused, Individualized Learning Approach

Community misperceptions of Brunswick Learning Center were cited as an ongoing concern. Students said, in fact, that the program has not turned out to be what they expected when they first started. By reputation, the school was supposed to be the "bad school" with "bad kids." However, citing differences between Brunswick Learning Center's program and regular school, students pointed out that the teachers are different. "They care and try to help, even with problems at home. They don't gossip, so students can develop a real friendship relationship. Teachers at BLC have a sense of humor...every once in awhile you just have to laugh." From the students' viewpoints, the kids at BLC are smart but misdirected: "They have brains but don't know what to do with their intelligence." The sensitivity, friendship, and personal attention teachers at BLC offer to students is highly valued because as one put it, "The ones picked on, the quiet and scared are the ones who come back into schools and kill people."

Community Connections

The strong linkage of the school with the community and its resources was cited again and again as a distinguishing feature of the program and an integral element in its success. Brunswick Learning Center is characterized by a strong degree of community interconnectedness as evidenced by jointly sponsored programs and initiatives such as TFDP and CAPS. In addition, close linkages with the community's hospital, as well as the support BLC receives from local businesses, industry, and religious and philanthropic agencies, are evidence of the close relationships that have been developed between the school and community partners. The school's efforts in the arena of community cooperation and coordination received formal recognition through the "Governor's Entrepreneurial School of the Year Award" in 1998.

Several years ago, at the encouragement of its chief administrator, Edgar Haywood, Doshier Hospital, a public hospital with a publicly elected Board, began choosing beneficiary projects such as Communities In Schools. Thus began the original relationship with Brunswick Learning Center because, in the words of the CEO, "It seemed like the right thing to do." The relationship between Brunswick Learning Center and Doshier Hospital has grown through the years to the extent that the hospital is now the sole sponsor of graduation exercises. Says the CEO of Doshier Hospital in his own words: "From an outsider's point of view, the guiding philosophy and purpose of BLC is finding the folks who can and want to be redirected in their lives and providing them with a chance to graduate. A ton of these kids don't have a person who gives a rip-happy about what they do. I have been absolutely amazed at their talents. When the military closed its doors to nongraduates, society lost its largest and greatest alternative school, so the cost to society of educating these kids became staggering. Therefore, the greatest benefits of this program are societal, from beginning to end. BLC is special because it has good leadership, and that's half the battle won as well as being absolutely necessary. The Principal believes in what he is doing. He got good teachers through leadership, and all requests he makes are from the heart." When asked what he liked most about Brunswick

Learning Center, the CEO replied: "The graduations that the hospital sponsors. Graduation represents the results. The kids who finish outweigh ten-fold the losses."

EXPRESSED ISSUES AND NEEDS

Additional Courses and Staff

The needs for additional hands-on vocational training and associated facilities, a suitable physical education facility, a functional media center, and more help from qualified social workers were also noted by interviewees as pressing. There was considerable opposition expressed by faculty with respect to the 4x4 block teaching schedule. While recognizing that a 4x4 block schedule enables close coordination with the structures at other schools in the district, most faculty felt that the 4x4 is a disservice to the population of students at BLC as evidenced by psychological research for both regular and at-risk populations. While most instructional staff pointed to the need for continually fostering an atmosphere of flexibility, several expressed the viewpoint that there was danger of movement toward greater standardization and routinization "for administrative convenience." Having made this point, teachers cited a need for the "freedom to be different."

Several student interviewees expressed the desire for additional hands-on courses and vocational course opportunities. Some felt there was not sufficient attention given to preparing those who wanted to go to college after finishing at BLC. In this vein, several pointed to the lack of foreign language and physical science courses which are necessary prerequisites for college admission. Faculty members pointed out that most kids attending BLC have never been allowed privileges such as fieldtrips and computer labs. College is not "advertised" and has never been offered as an option to this group. Although a high percentage is capable, a low percentage actually attends postsecondary schools.

Modification in Program Administration

A more centrally located facility was perhaps the most commonly expressed need elicited in the course of interviews. While it was felt that BLC had accomplished much within the constraints of its present location, it was generally agreed that movement to another site would make the services of the school more readily available to all of the district's students as well as solve transportation problems. Some students, and in a few instances their babies, endure bus rides in excess of 3 hours per day.

Maintaining/Fostering Effective Political Relationships

Several teachers expressed the feeling that the central office was not sufficiently supportive of BLC in public. Some felt the Center was slighted in public recognition at school board meetings and other district activities. One community leader felt that Brunswick Learning Center needed to have at least equal presence and appreciation within the school system. Visiting counselors from outside agencies that serve the Center expressed the feeling that the central administration of the school system was not in touch even though the school board sends positive messages. In fact, they said, the school board is now more open to what happens at BLC and likes to see what's going on.

Enhanced Education and Training

Teachers emphasized the need for specially selected professionals and materials in all alternative settings: "Children learn best depending on their individual makeup. If middle schoolers like and respect teachers, they'll learn. If they don't, they'll do everything they can to make teachers miserable. There has to be a connection. Most alternative students are kinesthetic learners and visual rather than auditory. Supplies are not always available to teach children who are different. Therefore, teachers must change the instructional format frequently; i.e., vary the presentation, switching from speaking to reading to listening to peer tutoring, etc. Teachers can't be as organized or programmed because it's self-defeating. They have to wipe away the program/model mindset. One can't superimpose anything on this type of group. Teachers must be more creative."

Program-specific professional development that teachers will "buy into" was described as being needed across the board. Professional development cannot be forced, faculty members said. What's planned for regular education teachers may not necessarily be useful. Home school faculties need to visit Brunswick Learning Center, and teachers at BLC need annual retreats for bonding and sharing. The general consensus seemed to be that lack of funding from the central office was a primary limitation to meeting these needs.

Elements Needed for Program Success

The elements most necessary for ensuring success in alternative learning programs were defined by faculty and administration as:

- (1) trained response people for crisis intervention and the identification process.
- (2) staff members who are tolerant, can deal with mood swings, and have thick skins.
- (3) a drug program.
- (4) an ongoing School Resource Officer.
- (5) parent participation.
- (6) consistent policies and procedures for kids and parents.
- (7) good communication with everyone outside of the school.
- (8) utilization of talents through activities with student-generated explorations.

CABARRUS COUNTY HARTSELL CENTER

BACKGROUND

Hartsell Center was first established by the Cabarrus County School System as an alternative middle school in 1994. During the first three years of its existence, the Center maintained an average annual enrollment of 30-40 middle school students. In response to a growing rate of suspensions at the middle and secondary school levels, however, the District later revised the mission of Hartsell in 1997. At that time, the school began operation as a "Suspension Center" serving short- and long-term suspended students. The rationale undergirding the establishment of the suspension center was predicated upon the assumption that "...for students to be successful and learn, they must be in school, and parents need to be more involved in their children's academic lives."

As a suspension center, Hartsell is a hybrid--a facility staffed with certified personnel, and technology with instructional software, where suspended students can voluntarily attend and continue to receive instruction without being counted absent and without losing credit for a term or an entire school year. The vast majority of its students at any one time (approximately 75%) are short-term suspended. The main focus of the program for these students is the provision of counseling in anger management, conflict resolution, and career interests with an eye toward preventing further suspensions once the student returns to his or her referring school. For long-term suspended students, the emphasis is on successful academic progress as well as addressing behavioral or other personal problems that may have resulted in suspension from the referring school. At least 25% of referred students are "no shows."

Cabarrus County has a total enrollment of 17,790 students of which 82% are White, 13.8% are Black, and 3% are Hispanic. A small percentage making up the remaining number represents the American Indian and Asian populations. Worthy of note is the fact that the county had only 21% of its students on free/reduced lunches in 1997-98, compared with 38.9% at the State level, indicating that the overall socio-economic status of Cabarrus residents is somewhat higher than that of North Carolina residents as a whole. The County's average daily attendance rate of 95.4 also exceeds the State rate of 94.8. This statistic may be related to one of the basic missions of Hartsell Center--keeping children in school. The average teacher supplement of \$1,580 exceeds the average State supplement by \$502, although the per student expenditure is \$123 less than the average State expenditure of \$1,268. The number of violent incidents per 1000 students was 5.7 in Cabarrus County in 1997-98, compared with a State rate of 6.3.

The County's gender mix of 50.7% male and 49.3% female is closely aligned with the State's demographic breakdown of its male/female student population, as is the 13.6% of the Cabarrus County's population identified as children with disabilities. The ethnic composition of Hartsell Center generally reflects the statistics of Cabarrus County, with approximately one-third of its students classified as minorities. The majority of students attending Hartsell are White males, and the preponderance come from lower-income families. Of the 26 long-term suspended students enrolled in the spring of 1999, 15 were eligible for the free lunch program while an additional 3 qualified for reduced-price lunches.

In 1999, 62.8% of the students in Cabarrus County took the SAT scoring a mean of 1003 which was higher than the State's mean score of 986. Only 61% of the State's student population took the SAT in 1999. At the end of the 1998-1999 academic year, 82.4% of Cabarrus County's elementary students scored at or above grade level on End-of-Grade tests compared with only 75% at the State level. On End-of-Course tests at the high school level, 70.3% of Cabarrus County's students scored at or above proficiency compared with only 60.1 % at the State level. Such statistics place Cabarrus County above the State of North Carolina in achievement at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

PHILOSOPHY AND MISSION

Hartsell's principal succinctly summarizes the school's primary objective as keeping kids in school and providing an alternative that will allow them to maintain "academic acuity"--a term he coined from, and associates with, visual sharpness. Further, guiding operational principles require that this objective be carried out within an "individualized, structured, and safe" facility and program. The goals of the Hartsell Suspension Center to this date continue to be uninterrupted instruction for students on short- and long-term suspension while keeping them off the streets; increased parental involvement; a reduced number of out-of-school suspensions; a lowered dropout rate; the provision of counseling in anger management, conflict resolution, and decision making; and, a reduction of daytime crime in the community.

Although the philosophy of the school was, at its inception, nebulously defined, Hartsell has since become a multi-faceted project that accepts students who are short- and long-term suspended, students seeking a GED instead of a diploma, and students needing more flexibility than those in the mainstream. According to its Principal, Hartsell is more tolerant of student needs and differences than regular schools. "Some kids are not even in school, and Hartsell is certainly important because it keeps students in school and off the streets. Short- and long-term suspended students continue their academics instead of being out of school."

The GED program is also a strategy to encourage potential dropouts who cannot "make it" in the regular school setting to finish school. Locally, Rowan Community College does not accept students for a GED program until age 18. As a result, those students who are 16 and able to quit school do not have the option of working toward a GED for two years. Because Hartsell can make only so much progress with GED students during their tenure in the program, however, a pre-test is required and students must score 38-40 points. Points totaling 225 are needed to pass the GED.

Success at Hartsell is measured by such things as the number of students with successful exits from the program, a reduction in recidivism of short-term suspensions, an increase in credits toward graduation for students who are long-term suspended, an increase in average daily attendance for the system as a whole (saved suspension days), and an increase in the completion rate for GED's. According to teachers, it's the people at Hartsell who make it special. "Not everyone can make it work. You have to care for the students who come here. Some of the assistants here have master's degrees, and the technology is wonderful! We can get more feedback in less time through the computer program, PLATO. For students, the wait time from a teacher is so much longer when they have questions and need help. PLATO makes it possible for students to learn at their own pace, doing things in their own ways, in their own time." The Principal believes that students need attention given to them without snapping. "Good teachers are not threatened by student behaviors. We want kids to feel safe here so they can learn."

When asked what elements were most necessary to ensure success for a program like Hartsell, a school board member replied:

- Definite rules that students have to know and people can enforce.
- An academic curriculum to allow success, like PLATO, which can be used for remediation.
- A staff that understands the students and is capable of working in different ways with them so they can be successful.

ORGANIZATION, STRUCTURE, AND FUNDING

Students are classified as either short-term or long-term depending on the number of days for which the suspension is to be effective. "Very-short-term" students--those suspended for less than three days--are not taken into the program. Students suspended for between three and ten days are considered short-term; students suspended for more than ten days are eligible for the long-term suspension program. Enrollment is voluntary.

Referral and intake procedures are highly standardized. Following the home school's suspension of a student and contact with his/her parents, the referring school notifies the Center (usually by fax) on the day prior to the prospective student's admission. This notification includes a copy of the student's suspension notice, medication order (if appropriate), and course schedule. For a student to be admitted to Hartsell on either a short- or long-term

basis, he/she must be recommended by the home school principal or assistant principal and accompanied at intake by a parent or legal guardian.

An initial interview with the student and parent or guardian takes place on the morning of enrollment. Although numbers vary, staff usually complete between one and ten interviews a day. The parent or legal guardian must be involved in the intake process and is required to sign a contract between the school and the student agreeing to abide by the rules and regulations of the Hartsell Center for the duration of his/her stay. The student is then referred to a counselor who administers an assessment battery designed to identify potential personal and/or psychosocial barriers to school success. Following the initial assessment, the student is transitioned to the appropriate teacher who conducts an orientation with the student and begins diagnostic assessment.

Hartsell serves a relatively stable population of 20-25 long-term suspended students each term or semester, in contrast to a total population of 426 students served during the 1997-98 school year. Long-term suspended middle school students have an opportunity to earn credit for core courses in Communications, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. Satisfactory proficiency in these subjects is demonstrated by a score of at least a Level III on the State's End-of-Grade Test. High school students have the opportunity to successfully earn 2 academic credits and one workforce development credit. Successful completion of these courses is contingent upon scores on computer-based learning programs, the student's current achievement level, and demonstration of the student's initiative and effort. In courses that require an End-of-Course test, secondary school students must achieve a passing score to acquire academic credit.

Hartsell relies heavily upon computerized instruction for its students. Use of the PLATO system affords a measure of flexibility for both subject matter and level and allows tracking of student progress. This instruction is supplemented by individual tutorial sessions with the student's teacher as needed.

The school day and schedule are highly structured and routinized. Beginning at 8:00 a.m., students are assigned to either classroom or individualized computer-assisted instruction (CAI) sessions lasting two hours. Those students whose initial periods are spent in the classroom are then assigned to the computer lab following a short break, while the reverse pattern holds true for those whose CAI sessions occurred first. At 10:30 a.m., a counselor begins pulling students for guidance--either one-on-one or in groups of three to five. A twenty-minute lunch period follows for all students, and the day concludes with a fifty minute enrichment period when teachers work with selected short-term suspended students on reading skills. Dismissal occurs at 1:30 p.m. Long-term-suspended middle school students observe the same length of school day; they do not have two class periods in the computer lab with PLATO CAI, however.

Parents and students are required to arrange the students' transportation to Hartsell. This is by design with the school's administration seeing it as fostering closer interaction between parent, student, and school. The school's insistence on clearly articulated codes of conduct and behavior is reinforced by such means as written contracts for conduct, consistent expectations of behavior, and maintenance of a "no-nonsense" atmosphere. In the words of the district's superintendent, "The principal has the worst of the worst, with no fighting; this is because he doesn't want a fun place but a productive place."

A self-contained program for behaviorally/emotionally disabled students is located on the Hartsell campus. Called WORKSS, the program "works" on **R**esponsibility, **K**indness, and **S**ocial **S**kills. Most are students who have been short- or long-term suspended and for whom the home school has run out of options. At the present time, two WORKSS students are Willie M and two more are in the process of being evaluated for Willie M. The DARE and School Resource Officers serve Hartsell and help with WORKSS when needed. The program serves students in grades 6 through 8 primarily, but at the time of the Evaluation Team's visit there was one fifth-grader. WORKSS is in session from 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., with 10 periods. Eight out of the ten periods are academic, and behavioral control is exercised through a five-level point system. To date, 17 students have gone through the program. Of those, two are incarcerated, two have moved out of the county, one returned to middle school but subsequently re-entered the program, six successfully returned to a BED classroom in their regular schools, and two were referred to Day Treatment but later hospitalized. The Principal of Hartsell Center describes his association with the WORKSS Program as being the "Principal of Record" with little direct involvement.

Funding for the Hartsell Suspension Center comes through the state consolidated fund for at-risk students/alternative schools and programs, with the exception of a Governor's Crime Commission supplement that

provides a counselor and a teacher's assistant. The Finance Officer confirmed that Hartsell is currently funded fully through the State's At Risk Funds with the exception of an \$120,000 grant for two years (\$60,000 each year) from the Governor's Crime Commission. After this initial two year grant period, the funds will no longer be available. When asked if the reduction in funds would affect next year's operation of alternative programs, the response was a hasty "no." In 1998-99, approximately 7% of Cabarrus County's \$1,532,000 state-allocated at-risk category funds were allocated to the Hartsell Suspension Center for a total allotment of \$265,200.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Shared Philosophy and Approach

Although Hartsell is relatively new in its role as a suspension center, the school receives strong support from the district's central administration. The district's Superintendent noted that funding was a politically sensitive issue when Hartsell was an alternative school, but negative attitudes seem to have receded since its transition to a suspension center.

The Assistant Superintendent is equally committed to the county's philosophy of doing everything possible to keep children in school and decreasing their vulnerability to negative influences outside of school when suspended. Children out of school, she said, "become detached with no sense of belonging or success. They become intertwined with behaviors that earn them a reputation teachers and students perceive as negative."

The establishment of a place for students who otherwise would have no alternative for placement during suspensions was also viewed as a success in and of itself by many of those interviewed. The benefits of a suspension program were echoed by personnel from feeder schools. As one assistant principal observed, "Serving the needs of those students who shouldn't be at my school and getting some counseling plus a safe environment are tangible and successful elements of the Hartsell Center." The greatest asset of Hartsell, stated one administrator, is that it doesn't give up on kids. The program may not always be fun, but it is productive.

Recognizing that most these students have average to below average attention spans and, therefore, need some time for movement, Hartsell provides frequent break times and a shorter day. The use of appropriate learning technology that enables immediate feedback to students was noted favorably in this regard as well. Computers used in the Center are valued as "no-fail, nonthreatening tools for learning."

Faculty Competence, Collaboration, and Cohesiveness

The presence of a caring and committed administrators, faculty, and staff was repeatedly mentioned as a critical element in program success. Many of those interviewed also specifically cited the leadership of the school's principal. As one student put it, "It makes me feel pretty good knowing there are people who take time to help me do something or pass something. I am learning. I have learned more about subjects I was bad on. My teachers are nice to me. If somebody is nice to me, I'm nice to them. I'm a friendly person. In the other school teachers couldn't watch all the children. Here it is quieter and teachers can say, 'how are you doing?' and give you help if you need it. I get along pretty good with fellow students."

Student Focused, Individualized Learning Approach

According to the student's parent, "Hartsell is different because the class sizes are smaller, the children get closer attention, and they work in smaller groups. It is a better environment generally, especially for a student with a learning disability or an attention problem like my son. There are more opportunities to get to know the staff at Hartsell than there were in regular school. They care here and take the time. I was involved before when my children were in the lower grades. I read to the class and helped with field trips. In the upper grades, it's like getting mowed down in the undertow at the beach."

Summarizing the successes of Hartsell Suspension Center, one student said, "I would recommend this program to other friends--I would say, 'It's a good program.' Teachers take the time to help you and tell you how to

do something if it's real hard to do." When asked what he would change about Hartsell, the student replied, "Nothing. I would keep it the same. It is a good program now. Why would I want to change anything?"

Community Connections

There is very little community involvement with Hartsell, although administrators would like more partnerships with businesses. The only reported link was through the vocational program which places students in the community. One student was placed with an aviation firm inspecting planes. Although the student was terminated from Hartsell, he continued in the job placement. Jobs lead to money which leads to hope, said school respondents. Hope for the future is important.

EXPRESSED ISSUES AND NEEDS

Additional Courses and Staff

Addressing the adequacy of staff, some cited the use of substitute teachers when regularly employed teachers have to be out. Substitutes don't know how to operate the technology on which the program is heavily dependent. As a result, when a staff member is out, that person's students have to be divided among the teachers who are present. A professional qualified to assess and plan instruction based on student learning styles was cited as a need, as was a school nurse. Currently, with numerous computers, Hartsell receives slow-to-no technical support. Technical expertise and service also were cited as a critical needs.

Modification in Program Administration

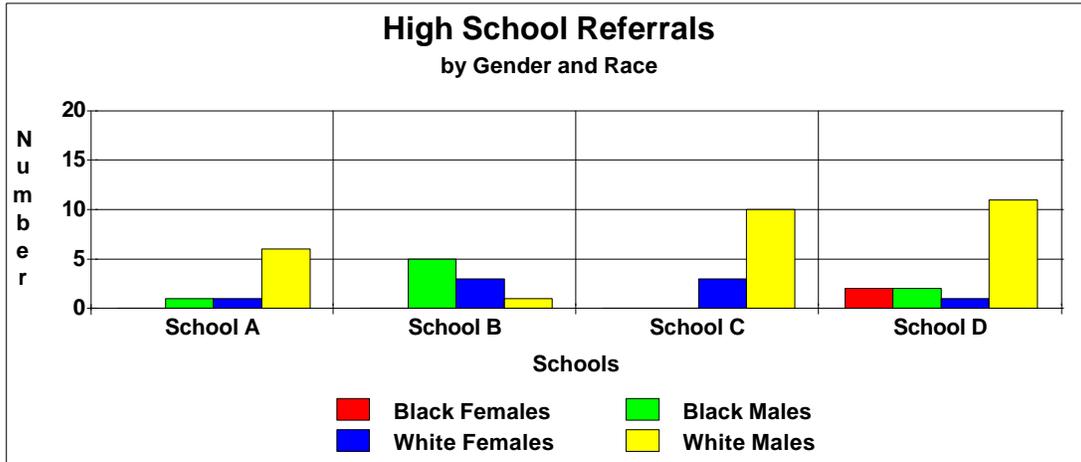
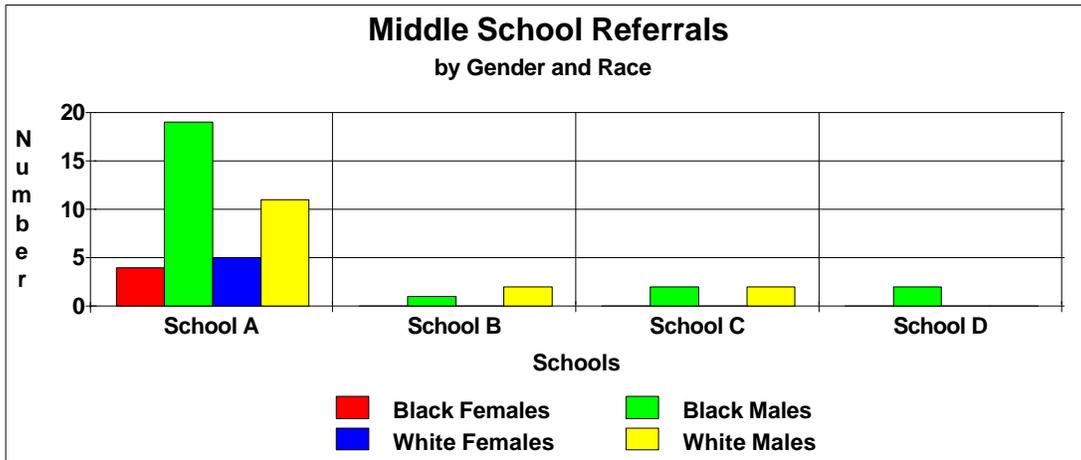
Almost all respondents alluded to the need for revamped physical facilities. The school's facilities were, in May, 1999, sadly lacking. In fact, three-quarters of the physical space within which the center was located had been condemned as unfit for occupancy. Plans were being made at that time to relocate the Center to another renovated school facility in the district when it became available. Several administrators and board members expressed the desire to co-locate Hartsell with the county's Computer Technical Center and newly established Public Charter School in order to provide a wider array of resources and opportunities. According to the Board Member interviewed, the Board has been basically dysfunctional for the past 6 years and, as a result, could not get bonds passed to build new school buildings, even though Cabarrus County's population is growing by about 700 students per year. Cabarrus needs to open two new schools a year, but can't catch up to the demand. There is no other space available for the Hartsell Center. On a more positive note, however, the 700-student-per-year growth rate budgetarily allows the County more teaching slots, and with those additional teaching positions the County is able to support the charter school and the suspension center without a great deal of negative impact on existing schools.

The program does not provide transportation, and some say, according to the Principal, that middle schoolers don't come because they don't have drivers' licenses. The Principal does not agree, however. He reports that most students at Hartsell are in the 8th and 9th grades. Transportation by parents was generally viewed as reasonable and acceptable. The Center does take Exceptional Children although it has no formal program or services. The IEP Committee at each student's home school is informed of the student's presence at Hartsell.

A school board member recommended consideration of the following modifications:

- Extend the program to lower grades.
- Extend the day an hour or so.
- Add more academic choices and maybe have teachers for elective courses.

Graphic displays based on information generated by the Hartsell Center through March, 1999, indicate that a disproportionate number of students is referred from one middle school and that the majority are Black males. This phenomenon does not exist at the high school level, however, where referrals are reasonably well-distributed among schools with a majority drawn from the White male population. According to one administrator the county's Diversity Taskforce is currently studying these issues.



Improving Coordination with Other Schools

Lack of staff resources to follow up with students once they have been returned to their home schools or have moved on to other high schools was recognized as a deficiency in the program. "A transitioning bridge is needed," said one administrator, "to transfer new anger management and conflict resolution skills so that students don't return to Hartsell. There is some quantitative data on improved scores and recidivism that indicates Hartsell is working. Qualitative data on attitudes toward school and learning also exist, but tracking data are still needed." Nonetheless, the relatively low rate of students returning to Hartsell is seen as at least partial evidence of program success.

Improved Internal Communication Concerning Mission Changes

Although there was considerable support expressed for Hartsell's metamorphosis from an alternative school to a suspension center, this sentiment was by no means universally shared. As expressed by one member of the school's staff, there appears to be a lack of consistent and coherent philosophy driving the program. This, in turn, was seen as creating a lack of clarity concerning the type of student to be served and the approaches that should be taken. At first, according to the Principal, the district wanted to send all of the students with behavioral/emotional disabilities to Hartsell Alternative Middle School, and it was "tearing us apart." The Hartsell Alternative Middle

School was being used to "warehouse" students exhibiting problematic behaviors with some principals saying they did not want the students back. In cases where the Hartsell Center considered student referrals to be inappropriate, it was typical for the referring principal to complain to the central administration, and the alternative school would then be required to take the student. On only one occasion, the Hartsell Alternative Middle School staff refused to take a student because they had already worked with the student for nine quarters with no success. The regular school principal still did not want the student back. Ultimately, the central administration supported the alternative school in the decision. Most respondents during the Evaluation Team's visit felt that the district needed both a Suspension Center and an Alternative School, and that the Hartsell Center should not be made to choose one over the other.

KANNAPOLIS CITY SCHOOLS SECOND CHANCE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM

A.L. Brown High School

BACKGROUND

A Best Practices Case Study was completed for the Second Chance alternative program in May 1998. Second Chance serves students in grades 9 – 12 and is housed in A.L. Brown High School, the only high school in the Kannapolis City School District. The high school is on a 4 x 4 block schedule, as is the Second Chance alternative program. This district has six other schools, five elementary and one middle, and has an enrollment of about 3800 students. It was reported that about 48 percent of students are on free and reduced lunch, 50 percent are receiving services from Title I, and about 50 percent have parents who do not have a high school diploma.

The Second Chance program was started in 1992-93, initially for the purpose of reduction in the district's dropout rate. It was reported that about 150 to 175 students a year drop out of school in the district. Staff reported that in years past from fifty to sixty percent of students returned. When the percent returning began to decrease to about 30 percent, district officials began searching for ideas to decrease the dropout rate, while at the same time, reach out into the community to re-enroll as many dropouts as possible. In the beginning, the program was housed in the gymnasium of the high school and operated as an extended day program weekdays from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m.. The program contracted with regular teachers, primarily from middle and elementary schools. The LEA superintendent described the program as being the "dream" of two central office administrators, the Dropout Prevention Coordinator (now also the Second Chance program administrator) and the Director of Student Services. He said the program quickly became a source of pride for the district, achieving success with students who were previously viewed as "unreachable". He reported that the district still struggles with "children from working class families and disadvantaged students" and said that he would like to see regular schools become more sensitive to the needs of these and all students. He said the district can learn a lot from the Second Chance program and that there is a need to translate more of the Second Chance practices to regular schools.

The superintendent said the idea for an alternative learning program needs to come from the practitioners, growing out of the school's needs. He said the superintendent's job is to support the professionals in their day-to-day contact with these students. The superintendent verbalized support for holding alternative programs accountable based on the same philosophy as regular schools, that is, "a year's worth of achievement for a year's worth of school". However, he said he is not sure the state's End-of-Course tests are the best way of doing that. He believes administering pre and post- tests is the best way of demonstrating accountability, along with tracking progress in student attendance and behavior. He said the regular updates about student outcomes and program progress that are provided to him and the local school board by the Second Chance administrator are extremely helpful in building support and responding to questions or criticisms.

PHILOSOPHY AND MISSION

Second Chance is based upon the belief that there are many ways to become educated as well as many types of environments and structures within which education may occur. Second Chance provides an option for dropouts, potential dropouts, pregnant and parenting students, and students who are not functioning in the regular school, for discipline and/or home reasons, to remain in school and work toward their diploma. Second Chance is designed to be less competitive and to provide a more individualized approach to learning. Second Chance offers instruction during regular school hours plus non-school hours.

The goals of the program are to enhance student achievement, teach responsible classroom behaviors; motivate regular school attendance; help students change behaviors that have contributed to students being unsuccessful in regular schools; strengthen the relationship between the student, parents, and school in a positive way; return the student to the regular school when feasible; help students get back on track to graduate at their

projected date; and prepare students for post secondary life, including further education, work, family, and citizenship.

ORGANIZATION, STRUCTURE, AND FUNDING

Second Chance is housed in its own area in the basement of the A.L. Brown High School. Second Chance has its own entrance from a parking lot. There are three classrooms, a computer laboratory, and a small snack room. All of these are along a corridor with rooms opening on either side. The corridor is closed off to the rest of the building so that there is no casual traffic into the program area. Students in the program are separated from the rest of the student body during the school day.

The hallway in the basement has student work displayed on the walls. A large photo display shows various activities of students in the program during the year. Other material is displayed related to program rules and procedures. The area was nicely painted and had an orderly appearance. Two of the rooms were set up as regular classrooms. Movable chairs faced the front of each classroom and teacher's desks sat on either side of the front of the room. One of the classrooms was set up in a seminar style, with desks arranged in a U shape. The computer laboratory has 8 computer stations set up around the outside of the room with student chairs facing toward the walls. The walls of the classrooms also displayed many posters and instructional material.

Some other parts of the high school are used by the program when not in use by regular students. A woodworking shop is used by the program. The students eat lunch in the cafeteria, but at a different time from the regular school population. Occasionally a student takes a course "upstairs" in a regular classroom when appropriate for the student and when a needed course is not available in the program.

The school day runs from 8:30 am to 3:15 p.m.. As previously stated, the program operates on a 4 x 4 block schedule, like the regular high school. The day is broken into 4 academic periods of from 86 to 88 minutes each. Students go to lunch at one of two times, either from 12:10 to 12:45 p.m. (first lunch) or from 1:14 to 1:47 p.m. (second lunch). From 12 to 15 courses are offered per semester. Self-paced instructional packets aligned with the NC Standard Course of Study are used for each subject. These curriculum material was purchased from an alternative learning program in Mt. Airy. Independent studies are sometimes used for vocational/career electives. Independent studies are not offered for subjects requiring state End-of-Course tests. While students in the regular program can get a maximum of 8 credits per year, it is possible for students in the Second Chance program can get 10 to 12 credits per year by taking independent studies for certain elective courses. Program staff report that there may be 7 different independent studies simultaneously in the independent study classroom. While this may pose a unique juggling challenge to program staff, it is reported that there are not many discipline problems because peer pressure is strong for appropriate behavior.

Program staff meet weekly to discuss the progress and needs of all students in the program. Further, because of the limited capacity of the program, careful screening procedures are in place involving staff from all referring schools to select those most in need and most likely to benefit from the program. During the year, a transition staff including program staff and staff from the middle schools and high school meet monthly to discuss the needs of at-risk students. At the end of the year each assistant principal is asked to send a list of the most needy students, providing a confidential description of their circumstances. Second Chance staff make final determinations about who will be enrolled in the program. At the time of the visit, forty students were enrolled in the program. The ratio of students to teachers is about twelve to one. Program staff reported that they had enrolled a lot of "hard core youngsters" during the current year. There was a large gap in the levels of maturity and needs between the group of students aged 14 to 15 and the group aged 16 to 18. For that reason, second semester, the program ran two tracks serving older students during morning hours and younger students in the afternoon hours. Many of the afternoon classes had a student/teacher ratio of 5:1. Interventions are arranged for other students not placed as often as possible. Program staff are helpful resources to regular schools.

It was reported that since Second Chance began there have been 50 to 55 pregnant or parenting students served. The high school's student body generally runs about 950. The program works with the fathers as well as the

mothers. Work with the students includes teaching appropriate parenting skills as well as academics. In addition, there is a focus on preventing additional teen pregnancies, both with the male and female parents.

Other students enter the program generally because they have fallen behind in earning credits toward graduation or have dropped out. It was reported by several sources, including members of the local school board, that the program has a waiting list. During the year, there is a transition team including program staff and some staff from the district's middle and high school. They meet monthly to discuss the needs of individual at-risk students. At the end of the year, the program administrator asks all assistant principals to go through their lists of at-risk students and review those most likely to benefit from the program. Each school is asked to send a confidential list of students, giving a short description of what each student needs. In addition, there is an active outreach by program staff to re-enroll students who have dropped out. The staff of Second Chance determine which students are admitted to the program. While there are a few identified Exceptional Children in the program, it is more the exception than the rule, since the program does not meet the legal requirement to employ a teacher appropriately certified to teach such students. Although the program is voluntary, both students and their parents must agree to the rules for the program. Specific requirements are spelled out in individualized contracts, including attendance, expected behavior in the class, and participation by the parents.

To enter the program there must be at least one interview with students and their parents during which the nature of the program and the expectations of students and parents are explained. Parents are approached in terms of what the program can do for their children. Throughout the program, the role of parents is an active one. Parents are also required to back up the discipline of the ALP staff.

Typically students who enroll in the Second Chance program are two years behind in grade placement and have from 0 to 2 graduation credits. Students generally have the opportunity to earn 10 credits per year and, typically, about 95% of all students earn their credits. The average grade point average (GPA) upon entering the program is .400. After the first year in the program, the average GPA is 2.0 or higher for the year. The average number of absences prior to entering the program is 30 and after entering the program the average number of absences is 3.

The superintendent reported that although the district was not a wealthy district, they had managed to fund the program through combination of local dollars, grants, and private donations. He said the program is "a patchwork, but it flies well". The program has received two federal Goals 2000 School Improvement grants, plus a reading teacher funded through Title VI. Another staff member, who works with the teen parents in the program, is funded through a Teen Parent grant. The School Improvement grants enabled the program to hire a teacher to staff their Learning Lab for students who have failed a course or a state End-of-Course Test. The salary of one staff member, a vocational/career counselor, is funded partially from a JTPA grant. Total grant support for the program was estimated at a half million dollars. One teacher position comes from state ADM funding. The program administrator/counselor, whose salary is paid from the state At-Risk Student Services/Alternative Schools and Programs fund, works 70% of her time with the program. The program hires two teacher assistants from local funds, one who works part-time and one who works full-time. The part-time assistant works the other half of his schedule on staff at Jackson Training School. One teacher is certified in history and teaches science, math and social studies. The English teacher is certified in English with experience in an alternative school setting and is new to the program. The staff member who teaches the courses for teen parents is certified in health education. One of the teacher assistants has a BA Degree in Political Science.

A certified vocational teacher is contracted on an hourly basis to teach shop and to work with students on vocational projects. Another teacher, certified in science, is contracted on an hourly basis to teach Biology after regular school hours, from 3:15 until 4:30 p.m.. A certified math teacher from the regular high school program gave up her planning period to teach Algebra 1 in the program. Students who need Algebra 2 or Geometry are generally scheduled in regular classes with support from program staff. The JTPA Counselor, one of the high school counselors, and the Program Administrator/Dropout Prevention Counselor, appropriately certified in counseling, also work in counseling capacities with students in the program. An assistant principal and the School Resource Officer who work with the regular high school are also assigned to work with the Second Chance program. Any student absences are made up on Saturday, when program staff work with students on their own time. Staff also operate a GED program during that time. Two characteristics all staff members have in common are that they are both flexible and nurturing.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Shared Philosophy and Approach

Staff report they allow some time for students to become accustomed to program expectations, operations and requirements. Students are expected to develop and change as a result of the standards and interactions communicated by staff and students who have been enrolled longer in the program. They expect to typically put more effort into helping new students. Further, they may tolerate behavior at the beginning, with intervention, that they would not tolerate after students spend more time in the program. However, program students can and are put out of the program. Although students are not usually suspended from the program, they do have a contract with program staff which, if broken, can lead to dismissal. Sometimes another opportunity is extended to the student with a revised contract, but only if the student demonstrates willingness and capacity to correct his or her mistakes. If the terms of re-entry are met and the student agrees to the amended contract, the student is allowed to return to the program. A student was suspended this year, however, largely because of the severity and impact of her disruptive behavior on the other students in the class. She was later diagnosed as behaviorally-emotionally handicapped and was receiving services in a residential drug treatment program.

Students report that the conditions in the program are different from what they experienced previously in regular classrooms. The involvement of staff with students is much more intense than in a typical school. However, they report that the staff set high expectations for them. When students fail to meet these expectations, they report being treated with the same respect, caring, and concern they receive when things are going well. It is at these times that program staff work with them individually to understand what went wrong and what they need to do to improve. Students report staff encourage them to do their personal best and discourage their talking about failure or not being able to do the work.

Faculty Competence, Collaboration, and Cohesiveness

The staff involve themselves in the student's lives both inside and outside of school. Numerous examples were given of staff being available when a student needed some support, or an adult to accompany them to medical appointments, court appearances, family crisis, or recreation. While there is a strong academic component, there is also attention to the social-emotional needs of the students.

The caring shown by staff extends beyond the traditional work day and work week. Numerous stories were told about home visits to try to get young people back in school, to bring them to school when they were absent, to sit with them in court and in substance abuse treatment sessions when a parent would not come. Requiring students to make up absences and missed work on Saturday creates additional burdens on these staff, but they do not seem to see it that way. It is all part of the intervention to teach students responsibility, to catch them up academically, or to prevent them from falling behind. They want students to achieve success in life as well as in school.

Students are accustomed to being expected to show respect toward their teachers. What stands out about Second Chance is the number of students who describe their teachers as respecting them. One student added, "They trust me to tell them the truth when I am out." Another said, "If I am mad at them I can tell them. They believe in us..." Several students described how program staff found them and kept after them when they dropped out of school, urging them to enroll in Second Chance. One set of parents said they would do anything for the program because they believed they had saved their daughter. A number of adults interviewed mentioned the importance of most of the Second Chance staff being interchangeable, to an extent, in performing their duties. It is helpful and extends the amount of individual support that can be given students when teachers can stand in for each other so that one of them can go to court with a student, for example, while the other staff member conducts the scheduled class.

Numerous instances were described, by students, community agency representatives, parents, and school board members where program staff sought young dropouts by locating them on the streets, at church, at recreation facilities, and at their places of employment, to try to talk them into coming back to school. They would not give up on these young people. To the students the messages translated were, "We believe in you; We care about you; You are a valuable person; We want you to have a good life and we believe you want that too; School matters." It works.

Student Focused, Individualized Learning Approaches

High expectations are communicated in a number of other ways. The curriculum in Second Chance program matches that of the regular high school, the state Standard Course of Study. Students are also expected to perform well on the state End of Course Tests, and the staff felt that their standards are at least as rigorous as those in the regular high school. Interviews with teachers who taught in the regular classrooms validated these descriptions of program standards. Students who have failed to meet the state competency requirements work in a computer program available for both the reading and mathematics tests. The content and level of student work is determined by printouts of their proficiencies. For the competency requirements, students focus on goals and objectives they previously failed. In addition, nearly every elective is custom designed to meet the needs of the individual student and to strengthen any other area of academic need. A career choices elective is also available for students. The course curriculum integrates reading and mathematics skill development. For students in the pregnant and parenting program, community resources are an important part of the program. For example, the Fire Department provides staff to do a unit on safety with children and the Agricultural Extension Office provides an instructor to do a unit on nutrition and to do cooking classes with these students.

The reading level of every student in the program is assessed using the Test of Adult Basic Education. The student is then placed on one of three levels in the Junior Great Books. Every student spends 45 minutes daily reading.

Staff realized that many students were failing because of attendance. Because of school policies, these students still had to stay in class and do the work, knowing they would get no credit. They came up with the idea of the Learning Center in an attempt to offer students a way of reversing the cycle of failure. The Learning Center is designed around the same principles as summer school. All courses offered are aligned with the NC Standard Course of Study and packets of materials are put together to cover the content of each course. The student is given the course packet of the course he or she is failing and earn a half unit of elective credit for Study Skills for completing the materials. However, in order to get credit for the course, the student has to take the class over or take it in summer school but having gone through the programmed materials makes passing the course much more likely.

The program uses the NC Standard Course of Study as its curriculum and administers state tests the same as the regular school. When students fail a course, they are given an opportunity, with teacher support, to complete the course materials in the Learning Center and receive a half unit of credit for study skills. However, in order to receive course credit, they must take the class over, either during the semester or during summer school. Students who have not met the state competency requirements in reading and mathematics are given the opportunity to work on a special software program focusing on goals and objectives not yet met. When students are absent or tardy, they are required to make up the work they missed on Saturday. Coursework is considered rigorous and students are held to the terms of their contracts, which include both academic and behavioral expectations.

Though somewhat controversial, the program for teen parents has several unique and important components. First of all, the program works, through education, to reduce the probability of additional pregnancies before the students graduate and can make the decision maturely. Further, the intervention is open to the teen fathers as well as the teen mothers. Teen fathers are educated about their responsibilities for caring for the child just as the teen moms are. They also receive the same educational interventions to reduce the risk of further pregnancies. The program also brings in community services like to teach about safety, nutrition, cooking, developmental stages, the importance of nurture and affection, and effective discipline. Teen parents also receive education about child abuse and neglect and what to do if they fear they are going to harm their child. Perhaps most important, program staff help secure quality day care services and assist in removing other obstacles to the teen parents continued education. More than ever there is a need to earn a high school diploma when the young person is already, at that young age, responsible for providing for their child. Those who criticize the program, it was reported, do so because they believe it encourages other young girls to have babies.

Community Connections

The respect held for the Second Chance program and staff was consistently obvious from the interviews with various representatives from community agencies. Those interviewed expressed a deep concern and understanding of the needs of many children in the community, especially where so many are reported to come from

impoverished homes. Home supports are further weakened by single parent households and those where parents do not have a high school diploma. These conditions tend to perpetuate a lack of value or, at a minimum, a lack of understanding of the value of education. This cycle is difficult to break. But cycles of defeat are being broken. They are being broken by agencies pulling together with program staff, providing support to families also, in order to undergird the needs of the child to be educated, to grow up in as healthy a way as possible, and to have the opportunity to thrive. Following are summaries of what the representatives of several community agencies had to say.

Juvenile Services. The Juvenile Services agent interviewed had graduated from A. L. Brown High School and had worked 31 years in his current job. He said he was grateful for alternative programs like the Second Chance program and the one in Cabarrus County (the Hartsell Center). He said he thinks the state is still failing too many children by putting “too much the emphasis on academics and not enough on vocational programs and skills.” He said he believes there are certain factors that will not change unless and until students learn to value education. Without serious intervention, these students are almost certain to drop out of school. The solution he proposes is to provide some type of manual training for 14 to 16 year old students in every county who have dropped out of school. At age 16, he proposes the students apprentice out and that businesses who are willing to hire and train them be given a tax break. At the age of 18, or upon completion of the apprenticeship, he proposes providing certification of the students vocational skills and competencies. At this time, he also proposes that students be given the option of returning to complete high school or to enter the military.

The agent reported that his job is to work with students who have broken the law and whom the court has judged to be delinquent. He makes recommendations to the judge about the progress of these youth. He said even in cases where restitution is required, like when a young person has vandalized a car, he still recommends community service for students. He believes youth need to have meaningful consequences. However, he believes that programs that work on mediation with misdemeanors like fighting are a waste of court time

The agent reported that he believes some of these students do not need to be in this program, but if they are out on the street they are more likely to get involved in crime or more serious crimes. He said that some schools implement Safe Schools legislation differently in that they immediately evict students who are charged with a felony, even before these youth are tried in court. In these cases, schools are pre-judging students as being guilty and some of them are charged with non-violent felonies. These students, he said, he can see enrolling in an ALP. He said it is a good idea to keep students off the streets unless they cause harm to the larger student population.

At the same time, the agent said that the current Safe Schools legislation is putting much more of a burden on principals than it should. He said, “... at some point we have to cut our losses and quit spending eighty percent of our time on two percent of the students.” He said we need to put more resources into working with students with whom we can make a difference. He said students committed of violent felonies should not be on the same campus as other students. If these students want to continue their education, he said it should be on a separate campus and with teachers who have the skills and ability to defend themselves. The agent said there is a great need for another ALP like Second Chance, on a separate campus for more disruptive, delinquent, aggressive, and violent students.

The agent reported that he is troubled by the number of young people who do not value education or see school work as being relevant. He also expressed concern at the high number of students from single parent homes, the growing number of undisciplined students, and those where there is a lack of respect shown in the home. The agent reported that many parents are afraid of their own children and do not want their children to be angry at them. They also fear the Department of Social Services, especially when social workers who have no children of their own are telling them how to raise their children. He said one there is a great need for earlier identification of problems because too many young people come too late to the attention of service providers. These are largely cases where basic problem is that the child is undisciplined and unmanageable in the home, often runaways and in trouble because of truancy laws. In cases such as this he said the judge cannot sent them to training school and the youth know it. He said the does not think the parents should be responsible; he thinks the young adult should be responsible.

Department of Social Services (DSS). The DSS agent reported that it is easy to work with the Second Chance staff because they “genuinely care for the students in the program.” He stated that the people in the community know that the program staff work for the youth in the county. The predominant community attitude

seems to be if the school loses one student they have lost too many because it will cost the community one way or another. He said the main strength of the Second Chance program is that staff can work with students in ways that meet their individual needs. He said the program students do not do well in large groups, as in regular classrooms. "Too many students in the regular high school get put on a shelf if they are not going to college."

This agent works with program staff after hours, when necessary, sometimes helping out with students not on his case load. He said a lot of these students have family problems. He said if a student is coming to class and falling asleep, there is a reason. He stated, "...it is easy to suspend students; it is a challenge is to find out what the underlying problem is." He said, "Second Chance staff are willing to go deeper to understand the problem." They ask him and they go together to the home to gain understanding and to build support for the students. He said they work together to determine eligibility for relevant community services and to walk through the red tape.

The DSS worker stated that basic needs must be met for students before higher ones can be. He said Second Chance students generally want to graduate from high school, but most are trying to survive day-to-day. The agent stated, "... the Second Chance program works the program around the needs of the child, while the regular program requires children to fit the program." He added, "Anyone can curse the darkness, but who can turn on the lights?" He mentioned a pregnant teen, living at home with her single mom, with no strong male figure present. He said, "Some say it's a mistake. I believe no child is a mistake. You may have strayed from your path, but you can get back on."

The DSS worker reported that students in other schools want to get into the Second Chance program because it is more caring and gives them an extra chance to graduate. He said the fact that some students get pregnant does not mean they do not want to graduate. College is not for everyone. The Second Chance program gives students hope for a better life.

The agent reported that others at DSS are amazed with the success of the Second Chance program. They wish there were programs like Second Chance in every school. He said, "... there is a rigid approach to discipline in regular schools. Students get in serious trouble for being chronically tardy or absent without finding out why or trying to help; many students get very far behind academically because of the block schedule with no chance of catching up...yet there are still adults who do not understand why some students lose their motivation and hope and end up getting pregnant." He stated that many people do not know what is happening in the program because they have no direct experience with it, yet some say it encourages young girls to have babies. He said, "... people who form negative opinions have never walked in this hall, talked to these teachers, or talked to these young people," adding, "When we see students that everyone else has given up on get in this program and then succeed, that goes a long way in selling the program."

Cabarrus Family Recovery Center (Substance Abuse Treatment). The counselor works with adolescents on an outpatient basis and meets two nights a week with parents and children, mostly focusing on parenting issues. She stated that students in the Second Chance are at high risk for substance abuse and that many of them have a substance abusing family member. She said she offers a ten week intervention/prevention program to students in the program scheduled to meet twice a week for an hour to an hour and a half each session. She always requests parent permission before speaking with students. Eight or nine students signed up for the program and she found that all of them were using substances. She referred them to treatment. She said close collaboration on each case is very important and that she does not have a similar relationship with any other school. In fact, she reported that one student in treatment did not have a parent who would come to meetings and one of the Second Chance staff members came with him.

Communication/Coordination with Board of Education

Two members of the local school board were interviewed. One member had extended an invitation to Secretary Riley of the US Department of Education to come visit the district. The Secretary took her up on the invitation and had visited the district the November prior to this case study site visit. She said it was a tremendous motivator and inspiration to everyone in the district, including the at-risk students.

This board member said she very much appreciated the regular statistics and reports from the Second Chance program administrator demonstrating bottom line student outcomes as a result of being enrolled in the

program. She said she honestly had not expected the program to be as good as it has turned out to be. Once she saw what the potential was, she wanted to see more resources provided to the program. The only wish she expressed about the program is that it were larger. She said she is bothered that the waiting list is long. She said all five board members support programs for at-risk students. She also said the district is organizing its early intervention services with their Head Start, Smart Start, and K-3 Literacy Programs. "But," she added, "...children like those in the Second Chance program are important and they are falling through the cracks.

The board member reported that the district has poor support from the county commissioners, from whom there is a push for vouchers and a push for merger of the Kannapolis City system with the Cabarrus County school district. Whereas the district budget used to be funded at about a 31% level, which is not very high, she said it is currently being funded at only a 20% level.

The second board member, interviewed at a different time, also reported that the Second Chance program had exceeded her expectations. She said she has been impressed with the accomplishments of the students, the leadership of the program staff, and the caring attitude of the staff who reach a deeper involvement in children's lives, perhaps because of the work they are able to do with students at times on an individual level. In general, the results of student involvement in the Second Chance program are impressive: their grade point averages go up, they work diligently to get back on track, and they graduate on time with their class. Both she and the other board member said they had students come to them and thank them for the opportunities afforded them in the Second Chance program to complete their education and redirect their lives in a more positive direction. She said program students had really taken to heart Secretary Riley's challenge to them to set goals for their lives and to identify and remove any obstacles that interfered with their education.

The Second Chance program administrator regularly collects and reports the status of students in the program using important indicators such as state test scores, attendance, grades, credits earned toward graduation, promotion/graduation. These indicators are important because they are the same ones used to hold regular schools accountable, and they communicate the same high expectations and standards held for all students.

Student, Parent, and Staff Member Views

Student Views of Second Chance. One young woman interviewed reported that the Second Chance program had helped her graduate on time and made it easier for her to care for her little girl, who is almost 3 years old. She said program staff helped her, whether she got stuck on academic or personal problems. She said that before the program she was a runaway and had drug problems. She said the program is like a big family and everyone in it gets along. She said the program teaches students that they can get along with all kinds of people. In the regular school, this student said she experienced too many conflicts and that it was difficult for her to concentrate on her work. She said from her point-of-view, most students in regular classrooms only do enough to get by. She said in this program, one of the teachers had really taken her problems to heart and worked so hard to see her graduate.

The father of one student's children (teen parent) said that when he found out about the initial pregnancy he decided to enroll in the GED program offered through the Second Chance program. He needed to get a credential to help him get a better job because he had to help support his family. He was the youngest and first A. L. Brown High School student to obtain the GED. He said the program has changed his life. He said the regular classroom teachers are generally not as supportive as the Second Chance staff.

Another student, who said she entered Second Chance as a sophomore, said she got behind in school largely because she was hanging with the wrong crowd. She said in the Second Chance program the staff worked better with her, even calling her if she was out to see why she was not in school. The student said that she got pregnant in her junior year and that her son was 20 months old. She said she then started living with both her grandmother and her mother. She said her mother did not discipline her. She said it was easier for her to concentrate on her schoolwork in the program because there were not so many so many students as in a regular classroom. She said another thing about Second Chance that helped her is that "...it is stricter, more structured, and there is love."

The student reported that although some regular classroom teachers are like those in the Second Chance program, she said some do no care or teach. She said they require students to take notes while they sit behind their

desks not helping. Teachers in the Second Chance program, one in particular she mentioned, would put notes on the board, explain what they meant, and then ask students questions to check for student understanding. She said the Second Chance teachers are not just there for students eight hours a day. At one point, she reported, her child's father kidnapped him. She said two of the Second Chance teachers went to court with her to back her up. She said students can call on these teachers around the clock if they are in need. She said she was so proud of herself when she graduated from high school. Although she was a teen parent, she only missed five days in her senior year.

Another student reported that if the Second Chance program had not been there, she would not have changed. She described teachers in the regular high school as being uncaring. She said they enforce the rules as they are, regardless of individual circumstances and that many teachers were rude to students. She said she would still be running around with the wrong people and she would not have found a job. She said the birth of her child also changed her tremendously. She said being in the program has taught her to be a more responsible person. Further, she said at first she did not want her child, but now she wants him. She said she needed strictness and love the program staff gave her when she was first admitted. She said there was nothing she needed that she did not get from the program. She came to get an education and she got it. The father of her child said that he is not ready to be married but wants to be there for the child and help out the family. He currently lives at home with his parents. He currently works two jobs (one from 8 am to 11:30 am and the other 2 p.m. to 6 p.m.) but is looking for a better paying job so he can just work one job.

Another student said he exceeded his parents expectations in the program and as a result will graduate early. He said the Second Chance teachers work with students if they have a problem and they get students involved in the program. If students raise their hands, teachers call on them. "They motivate and encourage students. They break questions down to help students understand." He said in the regular high school classes he was in teachers did not do that. "They had a certain group of students and they always called on them." He said those teachers left him on his own and did not help him. They would lecture for an hour and then require students to do their work in fifteen minutes. When asked if they could change one thing about the Second Chance program, one student said he would like for them to stop admitting students who do not care to be there to work on their education. He said students who have drug problems should not be admitted to the program.

A student told of her life prior to enrollment in Second Chance as one of skipping school, not caring about anything, and having a lot of home problems. She said it was when she got a drug felony charge during her sophomore year of high school that Second Chance staff really got her attention about what she was doing with her life. She decided to enroll in the program and after much hard work turning her life around, she had managed to catch up on her credits so that she was getting ready to graduate on time with the rest of her class. She said program staff show her respect. She said, "If I am mad at them I can tell them. They believe in us, they have determination about our success, and they have high expectations for us. I had to learn to leave my home problems at home and not take them out on people at school. They helped me learn these things by talking to me and calming me down"

Yet another student said that she had a child in middle school, who is now 3 years old. She said she came back to school for a week but had problems finding a baby sitter. She said it came down to a choice of her mom quitting work to keep her child or her quitting school. She quit school. She said within a month, the Second Chance program administrator called her to find out how she could remove obstacles so that the young woman could re-enroll in school. She contacted Social Services and helped the young woman get on a list for day care. Once that service came through, she was able to enroll in Second Chance for the second semester of the year. She said she had just gotten a job and now is paying for her day care services. She is sixteen years old now, and talks about how hard it has been to get this far along in school. She still has hopes of catching up with her class and graduating on time. She said program staff are like family to her. They want to know when she has a bad day, when she has personal problems, and when they can help out about situations at home. She said, "They care about us and help us a lot. If we have trouble with a course, they give us their full attention. If I am out, they call, and they trust me when I am out to tell them the truth. I'm tired a lot, and I have a lot of responsibility, but I do not use my child as an excuse." She is currently on the honor roll.

Another student talked about how one of the teachers on staff kept after him to come back to school. He had dropped out and was working in a fast food restaurant. He had learned by then that in order to get a good job he needed a diploma. He said he had nothing growing up and now he has a chance to have something one day. He said many of his friends are dropping out, working in a mill, working in construction, or selling drugs. He said he had also learned from his sister's mistakes. He said he is graduating and planning to go to the community college in the

fall, but he can still remember things about himself five years ago, before he enrolled in the program. He said he didn't think about the future and he did a lot of things like drinking and smoking that he doesn't do now.

Student Views of Regular School. Students also talked about their experiences in the regular program. They said there are too many students in one class. One student said sending him to the office did not really teach him appropriate behavior, nor did sending him to Saturday school, and then doing nothing when he skipped that too. One said, "When you say you can't do something, the teachers get smart with you. You don't have to be there. They should have more respect and pride for themselves and the students. I think that is why so many students skip class [because that is not happening]." Another student added, "Teaching is boring. They must be bored too. It sounds like a run-on sentence the way they teach. Down here it gets boring sometimes, but we change pace a lot and teachers talk with us, not just at us."

One student described the progression through the grades as getting progressively more difficult. He said, "Elementary school was fun and we were like a family. There was a lot of activity during the day and when we went outside the classroom, we walked in single file. In middle school, we had to change classes and it was crowded. It felt like somebody put you out on a rock all by yourself. In high school, there are a lot of people in the halls bumping into you. Teachers are mostly people with an attitude. You can't answer questions without them making comments that hurt your feelings when you don't understand something, things like 'This is sixth grade work!' They need to break things down more so we can understand them. I got in trouble for calling them names like "jackass". Down here they work with us a lot so we can understand our work."

Another student stated, "Someone could have been there to give me encouragement and support, but no one did. My mother didn't know I was skipping and my teachers wouldn't say anything. I was bored in school, so I kept skipping. Teachers didn't seem to know. There are no slips down here. It's one-on-one and if you goof up, they call your mother. I hadn't given up on school. It was just that I was getting no personal attention and no understanding out of school."

Regardless about their perceptions and comments about how regular schools and classroom teachers had let them down, they all agreed they wanted to graduate from A. L. Brown High School. They said, "A. L. Brown is the school!"

Parent Views of Second Chance. The parents interviewed were overwhelmingly supportive of the program. One set of parents had to come directly from work. They appeared in work clothes having not had time to change. It was an obvious effort for them to visit the classroom at that time of day, but they said they would do anything to help the program. From their perspective it had saved their daughter. They could name specific changes at home and at school. "She still isn't perfect," they reported, "but she's a lot better than she was before." In their case the program administrator found their daughter, who had dropped out, and kept after her until she joined the program. Further, parents reported that the Second Chance staff are very assertive in getting needed community services for their children.

Regular Classroom Teacher. The Head of the Mathematics Department of the high school taught Algebra I A and B in the Second Chance program for 6 weeks while one of the teachers was working in his other job as an elected member of the General Assembly. She taught this class during her planning period. She said before she taught in the program, she said she did not know what to expect. All she knew was what she heard about the students, which was not always flattering. However, after one day of teaching in the program, she realized the image of program students was inaccurate. She said they are as well behaved as her best students in the regular program. Additionally, she said the students in the class are very capable. Her impressions of the students has not changed. She said students in the program are interested not only in succeeding in math, but also in succeeding for the teacher. She said students thrive on individual attention from her and she enjoys being able to give it to them. She wishes she could do that in her regular classes, which have about twice as many students (20 to 25 versus 10 to 15 in the ALP class). She said other teachers in the Second Chance program are genuinely interested in these students. This teacher reported that there are a lot of misconceptions about the Second Chance program (e.g., students not doing anything, run wild) that she believes would easily change if teachers in the regular program taught in the Second Chance program for one day. She reported that she believes the community has more positive impressions of the program than the regular high school staff because they see students graduating from the program and doing well after high school. She also said the community responds to media coverage of the program, which has been positive.

Assistant Principal. One of the four high school assistant principals works with the Second Chance program students every day and said that she has a personal relationship with most of them. She said the students are good kids, they just come from bad situations. They tend to act out for attention. She said the success of the program stems largely from caring staff and their ability to develop close, trusting relationships with the students. The expectations are very high for students in the program. Courses are based on the NC Standard Course of Study. The only differences between the regular high school and the Second Chance program are that students move at their own pace and there is flexibility in scheduling in order to meet the individual needs of students. Students follow the same rules as in the regular school, plus have some of their own. The Second Chance attendance policy is stricter and the chances of a student getting kicked out are greater than those in the regular school. Students must demonstrate responsible behavior in return for the privilege of participating in the program. Because students want to be in the program, they struggle to do what is expected of them. The assistant principal said, "... though the goal of educators is to change student behavior, we often have to first change our own. We have to treat students as people and learn to look at their needs, not their faults. If a student is kicked out, they are out unless or until they decide they want to act in a responsible manner." As important as teaching academics, staff in the program teach students how to be responsible and tolerant and serve as models for them.

School Resource Officer. The School Resource Officer (SRO) said that he had fairly close relationships with most of the Second Chance students and many of them had problems in the regular high school. He said the program is allowing students the opportunity to get an education they otherwise might not be able to get. Until this program, students who could not make it in the regular classroom were out of school and had no option. He said he thinks the strength of the Second Chance program is that they teach in whatever way each student needs to learn. Students can ask questions without being embarrassed and the classes are more informal. For the most part, these are students whose behavior has impeded their learning. The program teaches them basic life skills needed to interact with others with respect and consideration. Another strength of the program is that the staff has the capability to teach what each other does. One can step in and take up where another left off.

EXPRESSED ISSUES AND NEEDS

Maintaining/Fostering Effective Political Relationships

While the Second Chance program has earned the respect and support of the local board of education, board members report continuing pressures from the county commissioners merge with the Cabarrus County school district. One source of pressure has been a reduction in the level of funding from county commissioners. Another source of pressure is a push for vouchers. While the everyone interviewed remarked on the importance and value of the fact that Second Chance staff persistently connect program students and their families with needed services from other community agencies, translating resulting student success into dollar amounts has not been done. Savings of court time and the time of juvenile justice personnel; incarcerations in training school, juvenile detention center, and jail; and welfare services can all be converted into dollars saved when the life of a young person is turned in a more positive direction and they graduate with a diploma rather than dropping out of school

Improving Coordination with Other Schools

The program is not well understood among students and some other staff in the regular high school. As a result, there seem to be some misunderstandings and even inaccurate impressions about the academic and discipline standards for students in the Second Chance program. Since the program is designed to limit contact with the regular school, where students have experienced academic failure and unsuccessful, even problematic relationships, the other staff and students do not have many opportunities to clarify misperceptions. To maintain and increase support in the district, the Second Chance program would benefit from creating opportunities to be better known and understood. Numerous people interviewed, including the Superintendent, even went so far as to say that regular schools would benefit if many of the practices with students in the Second Chance program were extended to those environments. Fewer students would *fall through the cracks*. The representative from the Department of Social Services put it this way, *People who form negative opinions have never walked in this hall, talked to these teachers, or talked to these young people. When we see students that everyone else has given up on get in this program and succeed, that goes a long way in selling the program.*

Extending Second Chance Philosophy to Other Schools

One board member articulated some of the issues that in her view the district must address. She said regular schools need to change. "We in public education," she said, "must take the students that come to our doors; we can't pick and choose." Further, regular schools must find ways to help students address problems outside of school, like teen pregnancy and child care. One of the helpful practices of the Second Chance program is that they bring community services to the school. Said the board member, "The Student Services Team needs to be expanded to include some of these representatives." She stated that the whole school needs to open up more to the community, using facilities beyond the typical 8-hour day. Further, high schools need to begin to address underlying causes of behavior and not just put Band-Aids on them. They need to be more flexible with starting and ending times for the school day.

Another school board member said there are growing numbers of students who are not able to succeed in a classroom with 26 to 32 students. She said there are those who expect so much of these students without giving them the small classes and the individualized attention they need to succeed. She said many teachers want to give more attention to each student but they too are overburdened. She would like to see the approaches of the Second Chance program extended for all, not just for at-risk students. She said some students in the regular program feel cheated. While they manage to bite the bullet and do what is needed to graduate, they sometimes envy the Second Chance students, wanting the same rights and responsibilities afforded those in the program.

Enhanced Education and Training

With all the needs that could have been expressed by program staff, such as higher salaries or extra work for extra pay, those were never mentioned. The only need that was expressed was for time for staff to have professional development needed to do even better things for children.

Community Needs

Several people interviewed mentioned that student attendance at school would be improved if there were a public transportation. Students may miss the bus, have to work part of the school day, or have personal problems to take care of part of the day, such as court appearances or medical appointments, which interfere with school attendance. Program staff, unlike the regular school, call to check on students when they are absent. They also try to help students plan ahead for transportation needs. Most of the time, staff assist students with transportation needs, but it is going beyond the call of duty for them to do so.

DARE COUNTY ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

BACKGROUND

Dare County Alternative High School (DCAHS) serves approximately 35 high school students with an instructional staff of five full-time teachers. DCAHS is a “site-based managed educational program providing comprehensive services to at risk students in grades 8 through 12.” This alternative school was established under a grant from the Governor’s Crime Commission in 1994, and is now supported through state and local funds designated for alternative schools and at-risk students. In 1998-99, the school completed its fifth year of operation. Situated in the downtown area on the street leading into Manteo from the mainland, DCAHS is located near the county’s central high school, as well as an elementary school and a middle school.

North Carolina’s easternmost county, Dare has a population of about 28,000 persons concentrated in the western and northern portions of the county. The economy is highly dependent upon seasonal employment, with tourism and related service industries, such as hotels and restaurants comprising the majority of employment opportunities. Deep sea fishing (both recreational and commercial) and marine services also contribute substantially to county’s economy. The nearest urban area is the Tidewater of region of Virginia. Post-secondary educational opportunities within the county are provided by the College of the Albemarle, a state community college. Elizabeth City State University is the nearest baccalaureate institution.

Dare County Schools has a membership of approximately 4,500 students, more than 93 percent of whom are White, almost five percent Black, and the remainder other minorities. There are nine public schools: four elementary, two middle, a grades 6-12 secondary school, and two high schools, including DCAHS. The schools are relatively well-supported financially as a whole, with per pupil expenditures from local funds about 40 percent higher than the state average; the average teacher salary supplement from local funds is more than double the state average. Twenty-five percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunches, compared to 39 percent for the state as a whole. In 1998-99 more than 84 percent of students in grades 3-8 performed at or above grade level on end-of-grade tests overall, and nearly 75 percent of high school students scored at or above Level III (proficient) on one or more end-of-course tests. About 79 percent of students took the Scholastic Assessment Tests in 1998-99, compared to the state total of 61 percent, with an average score of 1034, well above the state average of 986. The average daily attendance in 1998-99 was greater than the state as a whole. At 4.1 percent overall, the dropout rate in 1997-98 was below the state rate of 4.9 percent, although the rate for DCAHS was reported on the state Report Card for Dare County as 29.1 percent. The number of violent incidents per 1,000 students in 1997-98 was 4.8 compared to the state total of 6.3.

PHILOSOPHY AND MISSION

The DCAHS stated programmatic philosophy is predicated upon the fundamental belief that “everyone is entitled to the opportunity for an education,” and that through the provision of a more flexible and individualized program it is possible to reach students who have not responded well to more conventional educational approaches. As one staff person noted, “(DCAHS) provides a place for those persons not able to function in a structured high school.” Another said, “We can help everyone--that’s why we’re here.”

School objectives reflect this commitment. The objectives are:

- to provide alternatives for students unable to successfully participate in a regular program;
- to encourage student dropouts to return and complete their education;
- to assist students in completing courses required for graduation;
- to provide individualized instruction in accord with each student’s needs;
- to encourage re-entry into the regular high school;
- to prepare students to become productive citizens and life-long learners with a strong sense of

“ethical and moral obligations to oneself, others, the community, and the world at large.”

These objectives with their emphases on preparing the student for success throughout life are reflected in the school’s statement of desired outcomes for student learning, among which are that the students will acquire the skills and attitudes to be :

- critical, creative, and resourceful problem solvers;
- cooperative, collaborative team members;
- health-conscious and physically fit;
- competent technologists and effective communicators;
- lifelong learners;
- self-confident citizens;
- self-disciplined responsible individuals; and,
- knowledgeable, adaptable workers.

ORGANIZATION, STRUCTURE, AND FUNDING

DCAHS is housed in its own building and is operated as a separate school with a state-allotted principal. Combining extended day programs, both on-site and at another location in the county, with the eighth grade and high school programs on campus provides a student population of sufficient size to warrant the principal allotment. The school’s 1998-99 budget of about \$445,000 is a mix of about 20 percent local and 80 percent state funds. No significant changes in these funding levels are foreseen for next school year.

The instructional staff consists of five full-time teachers, each of whom is certified in the area to which he or she is assigned. In addition to instructional staff, the school employs a full-time counselor and a one-third time school resource officer provided by the county sheriff’s department. Access to nursing and psychological services are provided on an as-needed basis by the school district. The school lacks a resource center/library of its own and relies on the County Library for most print, audiovisual, and electronic information access.

The school is located in an old facility, which several of those interviewed describes as “Ugly, especially on the outside.” Some repairs have been made in recent years. Classrooms and offices are located around the perimeter of a former gymnasium, which also serves as a central assembly point for students and staff. Classrooms and offices located on the second floor are inaccessible to persons with severe physical disabilities.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Shared Philosophy and Approach

Administrators and teachers from the school, administrators from the central office and a feeder school, and a representative of a community agency (school resource officer)--ten in all-- were interviewed during the site visit. The interviews revealed a consensus concerning the educational philosophy and purposes of DCAHS. Further, administrators for the district’s central office reported that the program is believed to be special in both its philosophy and approach. One noted that it provides “a rescue for some students--a second chance,” and that is a special place because “of the people involved--teachers geared to these kinds of kids.” Another said that DCAHS is a place for at-risk students “in an environment that meets their needs” and pointed out staff dedication as a distinguishing feature.

Empathy with students and their needs on the part of school personnel is a special characteristic contributing to the school’s effectiveness. The small enrollment, the availability of extra counseling from teachers, the adoption of different teaching techniques and the flexible use of time are seen as unique and positive features. The school’s emphasis on active learning and helping students develop positive self esteem as prerequisite to the learning process was cited by the principal/director as key factors in the school’s effectiveness.

Interviews with DCAHS teachers and support staff indicate a common understanding of the purposes of the school. Teachers emphasized their belief that, as one put it, “Every child can learn, but not at the same pace.” Hence, a flexible approach is necessary to work effectively with each student. At the same time, teachers stressed it is necessary that the student has to assume some personal initiative and responsibility if the educational process is to succeed. Other goals for the school, as seen by teachers and support staff, include “equipping students with the attitudes and resources necessary for them to become life-long learners” and enabling students to leave school with a diploma.

In discussing their educational approach, teachers expressed a strong belief that “kids learn best when their interest is engaged--when they are doing things,” and when teachers have the freedom to figure out how to make this happen. All respondents noted that instruction needs to be relevant to the needs of students, and many expressed the belief that a “clear, behavioral modification approach is called for in a setting such as this.” It was emphasized by several staff members that “one alternative school model does not meet all needs.” A variety of schools and approaches may be necessary. Teachers said that the school needs to be a safe place for students. Another point widely shared by teachers is the expectation that students will pass their courses and get their diploma.

Students say they are enrolled at DCAHS for a variety of reasons. In their own words, these reasons range from behavior problems to the need to obtain sufficient credits for graduation:

- “I need the credits to graduate; I failed in my home school because of being absent too much.”
- “Because I was suspended from my last school.”
- “The principal at my other school didn’t like my attitude and kicked me out--my brother told me that (DCAHS) was better.”
- “Because I’m pregnant.”
- “My mother thought it best (that I come here) because of I had behavior problems.”

Parents of DCAHS students generally expressed strong support of the mission, goals, and approach of the school. Most held high aspirations for their child’s future. Some said they expected their children to graduate and then take classes at the local community college; one parent wants her child to return to the regular high school to complete diploma requirements, while another parent wants the child to acquire necessary college prep courses after leaving DCAS; and, still another parent said she expects her child to graduate and enter either the military or college.

Faculty Competence, Collaboration and Cohesiveness

Instructional personnel noted several features of DCAHS that they believe differentiate it from other schools in the district: Among these are:

- a high degree of cohesion and collegiality among faculty--one teacher described it as “a caring faculty who can talk together”;
- an interrelationship among faculty members that facilitates students getting help from everyone in the school;
- flexibility in school operations that enables faculty to spend more time with each student;
- an overall school climate that is conducive to positive student outcomes;
- a shared perception that teachers “take a genuine interest in students”;
- student expressions that DCAHS teachers “are all cool, except one”;
- student perceptions that DCAHS teachers are easier to get to know than teachers in other schools, many of whom they perceived to be “on a power trip.”

The school’s atmosphere is viewed as congenial by students. The differences of opinion that do arise are mostly “just normal high school stuff.” According to students, very few fights occur and those that do take place are dealt with swiftly. Students also noted that parents generally like the school and their enrollment in it; however, one student reported his parents dislike the “alternative school” label when it is attached in a stigmatizing way to both the school and its students. Most students said they would recommend DCAHS to other students, but one student resisted recommending it to “too many others, because then the school might become overcrowded.”

Student Focused, Individualized Learning Approach

Small enrollment, the availability of extra counseling from teachers, the adoption of different teaching/learning techniques, and the flexible use of time are each seen as positive contributions to DCAHS effectiveness. The school's emphasis on active learning and helping students develop positive feelings of self-esteem as prerequisite to the learning process were cited by the principal/director as key features of the DCAHS approach.

Staff members noted that support of the curriculum through instructional technology (such as self-paced learning modules available to students on the PLATO system) is a feature of the DCAHS program that contributes to its effectiveness. In addition, it was observed that by providing classes after normal school hours and at other locations at night, some students who work or have family obligations are better able to take advantage of DCAHS offerings.

Several members of the staff emphasized that both the student composition and the instructional approaches at DCAHS are not necessarily cast in stone. They observed that DCAHS is regularly referred to as a "program" by members of the school system administration and the county school board, suggesting that they want to keep options open concerning grade levels and types of students that may be served in the future.

Without exception, administrators interviewed expressed opinions that a separate facility for DCAHS is an important "plus." It enables the school to tailor its offerings to students in ways that, for example, an alternative program physically located within a traditional school could not afford. But, some suggested, if a way could be found to extend the hours its main campus is open, a wider array of course and extra-curricular offerings could be provided than are now available to students enrolled at DCAHS.

Students reported they are benefiting more from DCAHS than they were from their former schools. All but one of those interviewed said they are making better progress and are learning more. Reasons for improvements, they said, are "better grades," "good feedback from teachers," "the ability to take more courses," and, "just feeling it." Most students reported that their attitude toward school and teachers had changed since enrolling at DCAHS. Several indicated that they look forward to coming to school and "don't hate it as much." They expressed the feeling that their experience at DCAHS is much better than they had anticipated prior to enrolling. Students noted that here they are treated as young adults, they have more interesting things to do, and are "not always being watched." In the words of one student,

"It's not like you're really in school, it's like you're coming to school, but it ain't like other schools. You ain't got teachers on your back all the time. It's a lot easier. It's quiet--you don't have to worry about kids running up and down yelling, like at a regular school where they're running down the hall and other stuff."

Community Connections

Administrators and teachers reported that in their opinion relationships between DCAHS and the community are generally good, but that they might be improved if they were extended in scope. The school has cultivated relationships with its alumni and the PTA. Events such as open houses and facilities improvements to the facility (e.g., the construction of a greenhouse and of a ramp for handicapped access to the building) were pointed out as successes. The school has received support from the local electric utility company, and has maintained close relationships with the county's health and sheriff's departments, the police department, and the adult and juvenile probation offices. A close linkage with the local Jobs Training Coordinator was also noted. It was reported that the school resource officer, who is employed on a one-third time basis, serves as a facilitator in maintaining and strengthening community linkages.

Representatives from both the district administration and the school predict development of broader community relationships and more formalized interconnections in the future which will bring greater benefits to students at DCAS.

Communication/Coordination with the District Administration and County School Board

School system administrators expressed confidence that they are receiving sufficient information in a timely manner to enable them to keep pace with student outcomes. They say they keep in regular contact with DCAHS by means of both formal and informal status reports.

One board member stated that, for him, graduation rates are a signal indicator of program quality and are easy to track and compare. Another board member expressed the wish to have access to data that would enable him to compare DCAHS with other alternative programs in the state so that meaningful assessments of program quality and progress might be made.

It was noted by some administrators and board members that the majority of the board is new and that there will necessarily be a period of educating them about DCAHS before they have a full understanding of its scope and purpose.

Since it is the policy of the administration to hold DCAHS to the same standards of student performance as other schools, it is felt by administrators that there will be little unique impact on the school's program resulting from changes in state accountability standards.

Program Flexibility

A common theme expressed by the various categories of persons interviewed is an appreciation of the part that flexibility plays in program effectiveness. This flexibility includes:

- working with the local community college in providing course credits;
- the possibility for students enrolled in other county schools can take classes in the after school and off-campus night programs offered by DCAHS;
- emphasis on those things needed to meet individual student needs;
- students getting help from everyone on the staff;
- "being creative" (as one teacher put it) leads to greater teaching satisfaction
- small classes and students moving at their own pace

At least one teacher noted, however, that operational procedures have changed recently. Formerly, students used to progress at their own rate, but now the instructional program is semester-based. Concern was expressed as to whether this is a good thing for DCAHS students. Some of those interviewed observed that "over-regulation" of program structure and process might prove inimical to the effectiveness of alternative schools.

Others commented that there is a need for more than one alternative, e.g., one for students who don't want to be in regular school, another for students the regular school doesn't want.

EXPRESSED ISSUES AND NEEDS

Additional Courses and Staff

A desire for additional courses, teachers and support staff was expressed by several of those interviewed. Additional courses might include more electives (e.g., art, music, cooking, photography), foreign languages, health and physical education, computer classes, and more vocational classes. In terms of staff, an art teacher and separate math and science teachers were suggested, along with a full-time student resource officer, more time from the school nurse, and a social worker.

Modifications in Program Administration

Several teachers and administrators and some students identified several areas of needed change. As noted earlier, the need for more than one type of alternative program was expressed, especially one to focus on disruptive students; a student suggested two or three alternative schools in the county as a means of reducing dropouts.

A need was expressed for increasing hands-on activities in the instructional program, along with added vocational education offerings. Some of those interviewed addressed this point by calling for more of an experiential focus to teaching and less of the traditional academic approach. Others want a greater emphasis on remediation. Still others want students to become more involved in the community, suggesting the use of work-study programs as one approach.

The opinion was expressed that school administration should be carried out by a “teaching director” rather than the traditional principal concept, thus fostering greater teamwork and collegiality.

A better physical facility for DCAHS was cited by teachers, administrators and students as an urgently needed improvement

In addition to these suggestions, several teachers reported a concern that rules and regulations about discipline and attendance are not consistently applied; several objected to their lack of input into these matters. They indicated that discipline is handled solely by the principal.

Maintaining/Fostering Effective Political Relationships

Administrators reported that the most politically sensitive issues concerning DCAHS revolve around funding, specifically with respect to cost per student (the present teacher:student ratio at the school is about 1:7) and costs related to maintaining the separate facility. In addition, it was noted that the school’s close proximity to an elementary school is a concern to some in the community who see the potential for older students at DCAHS having a bad influence on younger children.

The opinion was expressed by one administrator that some board members don’t seem to have an understanding of the needs of at-risk students and the additional costs associated with serving their educational needs. Furthermore, it was said, many do not seem to understand the costs of “alternatives to the alternative school” (e.g., detention centers) and the long-range costs to the community of not meeting the needs of these students (e.g., students leaving school without a diploma, those who may later become involved with the court system, and welfare costs that might be incurred by undereducated students when they become adults).

In contrast, however, it was reported by several of those interviewed that news media coverage related to DCAHS has been both fair and helpful to the program; positive news stories and features about the program and its students have appeared in the regional daily and weekly press.

Improving Coordination with Other Schools

Administrative personnel from referring schools (“regular or home schools”) acknowledged the successes achieved by the alternative school, noting especially that the off-campus night instructional program is helpful. Some students do return to the regular high school and graduate (although fewer than half do come back, and the older the students are the less likely they are to return).

The administrators expressed mixed opinions concerning the efficacy of the referral process through which students are selected into DCAHS. Their referrals, they said, are made as a last resort after efforts at the home school have not proved successful. But, they further said, it has not been clear to them the reasons why some of their referrals are not acted upon favorably by DCAHS personnel. Usually, they said, those not accepted are discipline and attendance problems. However, students who request transfer are usually accepted, but acceptance by DCAHS of referred students under 16 years of age is seen as “more of a problem” (by home school administrators).

Representatives of referring schools were appreciative of the greater flexibility in scheduling afforded students at DCAHS--that the alternative school is not tied down to the 90 minute block scheduling of the regular high school. This, they said, enables students at DCAHS to obtain more individualized instruction and attention that might otherwise not be possible. They also see fertile ground for cooperation between referring schools and the alternative school, with DCAHS students taking some courses at their home school and regular school students taking night coursework offered through the alternative school for make-up purposes.

Along these same lines, several students at DCAHS expressed a desire for courses not currently offered there, including foreign languages, physical education, and mechanics. Although they are aware they can take courses at their home school, none have taken advantage of the opportunity. Some of them cited difficulties in scheduling between the home school and DCAHS as a reason for not doing so, while others expressed the feeling they would not be welcome back at their home school (the latter also was given as the reason for not participating in home school athletics and other extracurricular activities).

The differences in understandings between the referring schools and the alternative school, as perceived by referring school administrators, appear to undergird their contention that the greatest need for DCAHS is building and maintaining common understandings among all the schools.

In conclusion, the home school administrators who were interviewed noted that the county has a "fabulous" interagency council with good participation and commitment from members, suggesting that it might be a resource to be used to further the aims of the schools with respect to at-risk students.

Improved Internal Communication Concerning Mission Changes

As noted at the beginning of this report, DCAHS was established as a "site-based managed educational program providing comprehensive services to at risk students in grades 8 through 12." Its stated operational philosophy is rooted in the belief that "through the provision of a more flexible and individualized program it is possible to reach students who have not responded well to more conventional educational approaches."

Both instructional and support staff at DCAHS generally shared the perspective that the program as well as the nature of the student body has changed over time. Several expressed the view that "students are less motivated now" because many are at DCAHS under court order. The addition of a middle school component is not favored by some of those interviewed who feel that this has resulted in the addition of "younger kids who need more active teaching and have less personal responsibility."

Concern was expressed that the school is gaining a reputation both in other schools and in the community at large as a "dumping ground for bad kids," even though this is not the case in reality.

Among other changes which some instructional and support staff viewed unfavorably is the move to a semester-based program, in which students are less able to proceed at their own pace. There seemed to be a shared sentiment that there is "increased pressure to produce the same results as other schools" in test scores and graduation rates, and that this is having an adverse effect on the school's mission and operation.

Enhanced Education and Training

Teachers were asked their opinion regarding the usefulness of both their formal education and their continuing education/staff development in preparing them to teach in an alternative school.

The consensus was that their formal training had been of marginal utility, although one teacher said, "My special education training helped cut my teeth on alternative education methods and issues."

Teachers reported that few professional development activities in which they have participated focused on alternative education. One teacher did indicate, however, that she had attended an anger management workshop and

a middle school conference at which some issues pertinent to alternative education were addressed. When asked to identify needed areas of professional development, teacher responses included:

- hands on experiences and internships
- training in legal issues and updates of legal changes as they occur
- a credentialing mechanism that recognizes alternative education as a specialty, perhaps including a national board
- state-sponsored motivation and sharing sessions
- on-going alternative school dialogue

WINSTON-SALEM/FORSYTH COUNTY LEAP ACADEMY

BACKGROUND

Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools' LEAP Academy was in its third year of operation during the 1998-99 school year. It was established as an alternative educational opportunity for middle school students deemed academically at risk. LEAP, as its name suggests, is designed to compress two academic years into one for students who have fallen behind in their schooling so that they may return "on-track" to regular schools within the district. The academy currently enrolls up to 240 students drawn from all middle schools in the district. The current principal assumed that position during the 1998-99 school year.

Located in the Northwestern Piedmont section of North Carolina, Forsyth County has a population of slightly under 300,000 persons. There are seven municipalities within the county, the largest of which is Winston-Salem which contains well over one-half of the county's population. The local economy has a large manufacturing base, with textiles, tobacco products, electronic equipment, and industrial equipment being the most prominent in terms of personal income. Winston-Salem is the financial center for the geographical area in which it is located. Two institutions in the University of North Carolina system, a major private university, a liberal arts college, a bible college, and a state community college are located in Winston-Salem.

Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools has a membership of over 42,000 students, 56 percent of whom are White, 38 percent Black, and almost five percent Hispanic. The system has a total of 61 schools. The local per pupil expenditure is about 50 percent higher than expenditures per pupil from local funds for the state as a whole; the average teacher salary supplement from local funds is almost three times the state average. Just over 35 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced price lunches, compared to 39 percent for state as a whole. In 1998-99 about 75 percent of students in grades 3-8 performed at or above grade level on state end-of-grade tests, and 64 percent of high school students scored at or above Level III (proficient) on one or more end-of-course tests. Nearly 70 percent of students took the Scholastic Assessment Tests in 1998-99, compared to the state total of 61 percent, with an average combined score on the tests of 993, just above the state average of 986. The average daily attendance was 94.1 percent (94.8 percent statewide). At 5.2 percent, overall, the dropout rate in 1997-98 was higher than the state rate of 4.9 percent. The number of violent incidents per 1,000 students in 1997-98 was 5.8 compared to the state total of 6.3.

PHILOSOPHY AND MISSION

Since its inception the mission of LEAP has been to serve students in middle school grades who are identified as being at-risk academically--those who have been retained at least one year. The approach is to provide an intensive curriculum that enables students to complete the instructional program for the year that they were retained and fulfill the requirements of the grade to which they otherwise would have been promoted. For example, a student who failed the sixth grade and entered LEAP Academy would, in the course of one year complete the requirements of both the sixth grade and the seventh grade. He or she would then "leap" ahead to the eighth grade and attend one of the regular schools in the district. Three cohorts of students are enrolled at LEAP: 6th/7th graders "leaping" to grade 8; 7th/8th graders "leaping" to grade 9; and, 8th/9th graders "leaping" to grade 10. An exception to the one-year program length may be made for students in grade 7 at LEAP who have the option of returning for a second year if they fail to complete their program successfully during the first year. In the 2000-2001 school year, LEAP will serve fifth and sixth grades.

Extra time is a key element of the program's operation. Students are enrolled for a 200-day session, in contrast to the 180-day year for "regular" schools. While at LEAP, students are provided academic instruction along with personal guidance and counseling provided by both in-house staff members and resource personnel from agencies within the larger community.

Although a philosophy emphasizing student-centeredness both in curriculum and personal attention has continued, administrators and other staff report greater attention is now given to “holding kids accountable” for their behavior, as contrasted to earlier years when less emphasis on behavioral consequences was required.

The principal noted some changes in discipline procedures. “The purpose,” she said, “is to keep kids in school, rather than immediately suspended and out of school.” A three-step procedure calls, first, for counseling a student about inappropriate behavior, then, if needed, in-school suspension, then, as a last resort, out-of-school suspension.

In a related procedural change, the principal pointed to a new focus on “attendance improvement,” rather than on attendance, per se. As a part of this emphasis, the school has instituted a “buy-back” program, whereby a student can spend two afternoons in attendance after school to make up one day of absence.

ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

The structure of LEAP Academy has remained relatively stable since its inception. The compression of two academic years into one is unique among the state’s alternative education programs.

Applications for admission to LEAP are sent to middle school students in the district who have been retained by their home schools, with the academy receiving 500 to 600 applications each year as a result of this process. They are screened by teams of LEAP teachers and administrators, with attention given to each prospective student’s academic and disciplinary record as compiled by the referring school. About 40 percent of the applicants are accepted, the result of both assessment of their suitability for the program and enrollment limits due to space. Another program contracts with the district to serve students not admitted to LEAP. The bulk of admissions are for the fall semester; the only spaces available at mid-year arise from the small number of academy dropouts.

LEAP has a full-time faculty of 30 for 1998-99, resulting in a student to teacher ratio of 15:1. The school’s professional support staff consists of one full-time counselor and a one-third time social worker. Additional professional resources are provided by the district on an “as needed” basis. LEAP employed six teaching assistants during 1998-99, but the principal said she plans to convert those positions to an additional counselor and a home-school coordinator next year.

Faculty members are grouped into teams, with each team classified by the cohort of students that they serve. This year each team is provided a teacher assistant.

Student ethnic composition appears to be representative of the district as a whole--about 50 percent White, 43 percent black and the rest Hispanic and other minorities--but the percentage of boys enrolled is approximately double that of girls.

During 1998-99, LEAP was housed in a partially renovated school located on Winston-Salem’s near north side. From the outside, the building and surrounding grounds appear to be somewhat run-down, but inside the classrooms and administrative areas show evidence of recent renovation. Hallways and classrooms are generally clean and well lighted, with motivational posters and theme prints lining the walls. The school does have space dedicated to a library/media center, but few materials were visible to observer/interviewers during their visit. Classrooms are generally single purpose, that is, used by one teacher for one subject area, and with traditional seating arrangements the norm. Little student work was on display. Faculty workspace is limited to areas within the classroom and a small teacher’s lounge.

LEAP follows the state standard course of study with instruction in each of the core courses necessary for completion of students’ appropriate grade levels. Only a few elective or non-academic courses are available--art, music, physical education, and computer technology.

There is a central computer laboratory staffed by one teacher and an a teacher assistant. Approximately 50 computers are available for student use; computer assisted instruction (CAI) modules utilizing the SuccessMaker

curriculum package enable students to undertake individualized instruction at their own pace. CAI is used to supplement classroom instruction, and daily reports on the progress students make on the modules is provided for teachers in all classes. Each computer also has the capability of accessing the Internet.

The school shared its facility with the Winston-Salem Police Academy during the 1998-99 school year, which both administrators and teaching staff see as beneficial to the school. Having the Police Academy at this location has resulted in the presence of two or more police cruisers in the facility's parking lot at most times of the day, an added security feature for LEAP Academy. Police rookies also serve as informal mentors for students from time to time.

The principal noted that news media coverage of LEAP has been fair and that information about the school is starting to get out to the community at large. A community agency staff member said the school gets media coverage on special occasions, but to judge whether it is fair coverage there would have to be more of it.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Some of the following practices and approaches taken by LEAP Academy may well hold promise for other alternative education programs if they choose to replicate or adapt them.

Shared Philosophy and Approach

LEAP's philosophy and approach of combining student remediation with counseling and appropriate ancillary services was widely praised by those interviewed for meeting the needs of a large number of academically at-risk students. The program is viewed by members of the district administration and representatives of community agencies as fulfilling its mission of affording an opportunity for students to get "back on track" in their academic and personal lives, while at the same time reducing the incidence of dropouts.

In 1998, LEAP Academy was one of only nine schools in the state, and the only alternative education school, to be recognized with a Governor's Entrepreneurial Schools Award.

Faculty Competence, Collaboration, and Cohesiveness

The dedicated teaching staff as a crucial element in LEAP's success was emphasized by a number of the persons who were interviewed, including representatives of collaborating agencies, parents, and administrators. Although some teachers want go somewhere else, most indicated their desire to remain with LEAP and see it through what some see as a moderately lengthy period of change. A community agency representative noted that the teaching staff is what makes LEAP special. "They bond with kids, support them during difficult times, and are sincere. Kids recognize sincerity."

The school's current administrator, although on board for only a few months, was lauded by a number of those interviewed, including staff, parents, and community agency representatives, for her level of enthusiasm and commitment to program success. Some expressed appreciation for her willingness to consider programmatic redirection in an effort to strengthen the school.

Student Focused, Individualized Learning Approach

Teachers reported that the best instructional approach depends on the individual child and flexibility is needed to meet that child where he or she seems to learn best. For example, one child may do best sitting at a desk, another sitting on the floor, and another on his or her feet. Small classes help, they said, but one teacher said she had to pull away from providing too much flexibility in individual learning because she found most of these children required a more structured environment. Another commented that one of the rewards of teaching at LEAP is that positive "changes made by kids are more obvious than at other schools."

Early in its existence, LEAP employed California Achievement Test results to determine a student's readiness to "leap." Now the program uses the results from secure-released state end-of-grade tests for "leaping" students from one grade level to the next. These tests are directly linked to the state's ABCs of Public Education curriculum and assessment program, and their use in this way provides a greater level of assurance that each student will be prepared to continue making suitable progress when he or she returns to a regular school.

Community Connections

LEAP is making progress in establishing collaborative relationships with community agencies and resources. During 1998-99, the school joined with the county's Sheriff's Department to develop a proposal for a gang prevention program. Modest steps toward securing funds from private sources have also been undertaken, for example, a request for support from a local bank. In addition, LEAP has entered into close collaboration with the county departments of mental health and human services and with the court system's juvenile services office (some ten LEAP students were under court supervision in the spring of 1999).

Students who violate the school's drug and/or alcohol policies can elect to participate in a program called Step One, an alternative to expulsion. This program provides intensive counseling and prevention/treatment services in an effort to divert participating students from further substance abuse. It is anticipated that next year the Cornell Life Skills Program will be introduced to assist students better identify their own strengths and needs. Also currently involved with LEAP is Center Point, a program that works with families of children who suffer from dual diagnoses of substance abuse and mental/emotional disorders. While this agency has contact with LEAP only through referred clients, a representative expressed the feeling that his agency's participation with LEAP represents "a collaborative effort to get kids where they need to be. Nothing is allowed to become stagnant--LEAP is receptive to constant review."

EXPRESSED ISSUES AND NEEDS

In addition to providing a better mix of counseling and related support services to the academic program, as suggested in the preceding section, many of those interviewed raised issues and pointed out needs they believe need to be addressed in order that the students at LEAP can be better served.

Additional Courses and Staff

A number of students, teachers, parents and administrators noted a lack of curriculum breadth at LEAP Academy. They called for additional courses to be available. Included among the courses suggested are foreign languages (especially Spanish), vocational education, band and chorus, parenting classes, and a broader range of electives similar to those available at other schools in the district.

In general, teachers at LEAP expressed the belief that there is a sufficient number and quality of instructional personnel to implement the current academic curriculum. On the other hand, many said that there is a need for additional professional support staff, such as full-time counselors and social workers. More adequate clerical support is needed for record keeping. Most said they believe additional personnel will not come about through regular assignments of personnel by the district administration, but will require effective grantsmanship on the part of the principal and administration.

Modifications in Program Administration

As noted earlier in this report, the program has been portrayed since the beginning as one for academic at-risk students. Staff members at LEAP indicated that there have been tacit, if not explicit changes in the program over time. Several noted that currently the school serves a high percentage of students who were "major" discipline problems at the referring schools. This change in the character of the student body has resulted in a disconnect between LEAP's original strictly academic model approach and the needs of its current student population.

Although only at the talking stage at the time interviews were held, the principal said she is exploring a change in the expressed program philosophy and operation. . The reality, she said, is that students who are here now have a wide variety of personal, behavioral and academic needs. Changes in program approaches and practices, she believes, will hold more promise for meeting these needs. The model she envisions would move from an academics-only focus that integrates two school years into a single 200-day year to a two-year program. During the first year, students would concentrate on basic academics and receive intensive counseling and guidance services; during the second year students would be placed into a LEAP program, similar to the current approach. The net effect would be for students to spend two years at LEAP Academy to gain three school years. In tandem with this approach would be segmenting the facility into several wings, each wing housing a different type of at-risk population, such as English-As-A-Second Language students, low academic achievers, and students who have had discipline problems. In a related matter, the principal noted that she would like to see LEAP become a program of student choice, and a teacher observed that for an alternative program to achieve success it must include only “kids who want to be here.”

Many teachers noted that the lack of a library/resource center is a detriment to their teaching and that “research is an impossibility.” This is a need, they say, that cannot be addressed by reliance on occasional trips to the county library. The lack of science labs was also noted, and a community agency representative said the program needs updated technology and exposure to systems and ideas from other areas of the country.

The location and physical condition of the school facility came under criticism by some school staff members and agency representatives. In addition, some felt that the bad reputation of another program once housed at the same school carried over to LEAP when it moved in. The anticipated change to another location next year may resolve both issues, it was suggested.

Maintaining/Fostering Effective Political Relationships

Several persons interviewed, including teachers and representatives of other agencies, expressed the view that there is insufficient support for LEAP from the highest levels of the district’s administration. Some suggested this may be due to unfamiliarity with the program as it actually operates; accordingly, they said, decisions are often made without sufficient consideration of the effects on the school and its mission. An agency staff member said that needs of LEAP could best be addressed by a system of advocacy from the top down, and that the program should have consistency in staffing, location and programming.

Improved Internal Communication Concerning Mission Changes

As noted earlier, LEAP was said to have been designed originally to meet the needs of academically at-risk students, not to be a program for behavior problems. In fact, many students now entering the academy do have behavior problems, a concern for a number of staff members; consequently, many teachers would like a change in admissions policies to address this issue. Some parents said they thought problem kids were not going to be at LEAP and opined that “maybe some other principals have doctored records of some kids to get rid of them.” They believe it should be a privilege for students to be here and that there needs to be something else for “kids who don’t care--maybe a boot camp-type thing.”

Enhanced Education and Training

Teachers stressed that teaching at LEAP is different from other teaching experiences they have had because “...it requires incredible energy. There is more give and take in regular schools. Here, teachers give and students take. A teaching day is draining.” According some of LEAP’s teachers, formal education was not at all useful in preparing them to teach in an alternative program. They emphasized “experience” when asked what suggestions they would make to providers of formal education so that it would be more useful in preparing alternative education teachers. “The most useful classes in universities are taught by professors who still have one foot in the (elementary and secondary) classroom and who know what it’s like to be in the trenches.”

HAYWOOD COUNTY CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

BACKGROUND

Central Haywood High School (CHHS), located in Clyde, North Carolina, first opened its doors in the fall of 1994. Several years of planning preceded the implementation of Haywood County's alternative educational program which is designed for students who are deemed at risk of dropping out of school. CHHS has been under the direction of its principal, Mr. Richard Reeves, since its inception. The facility is currently located in a renovated former savings-and-loan building which was selected for the school's site due to its central location on the main street in town and its availability to the county at a reasonable cost. The school facility contains six classrooms, a computer lab, four offices, and a multipurpose room at the entrance to the building which serves as a homeroom/assembly hall, lunchroom, and media center. Space also has been donated by an adjoining church for the school's occasional use. Plans are currently in progress for a move to a larger facility during the 1999-2000 academic year.

The school's enrollment fluctuates during the course of the academic year. During the 1998-1999 school year, enrollment averaged 75 students, with a peak of 83 and a minimum of 55. The school also runs the county's extended day program, and the enrollment of these students, combined with Central's full-time student body, enables it to be funded and administered as a separate school. In the spring of 1999, CHHS applied for, and was granted, initial accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Haywood County, the home of Central Haywood High School, is a largely rural, mountainous region located close to Asheville. While agriculture and associated industries (especially forestry, lumbering and paper production) remain major sources of employment and revenue in the county, the service industry sector is the most rapidly growing, especially given the county's increasing population of seasonal and retired residents and vacationers.

The student membership of Haywood County increases by only 100 per year, and many of the county's demographics closely align with those of the State. For example, average daily attendance during 1998-99 was 95.0 compared to the State average of 94.8. Number of violent incidents per 1000 in 1997-98 was 6.4 compared with 6.3 at the State level. Average per pupil expenditure in 1997-98 was \$1,285 per child while the State spent \$1,268.

Unlike the State, the ethnic breakdown of the county indicates that the vast majority of students, 96.2%, are White, with Black and Hispanic populations of 1.9% and 1.3% respectively. A small number of the county's students are American Indian and Asian. The county also differs from State-level statistics in the number of children eligible for free and reduced-price lunches and the average teacher supplement paid from local dollars. Haywood County reports a lower percentage, 32.6%, than the State's 38.9% of students on federally subsidized lunches indicating that the socio-economic status of Haywood County's residents is somewhat higher than the socio-economic status of residents state-wide. The Assistant Superintendent reported, however, that a greater percentage of students at Central Haywood receive free and reduced lunches than the county's percentage as a whole. The Department of Public Instruction's most recent Report Card indicates that Haywood County subsidizes teachers' salaries annually from local funds by only \$530 compared with an average teacher supplement of \$1,078 at the State level.

In 1998-1999, dropout rates for Pisgah High School and Tuscola High School in Haywood County averaged 5.0 compared to the State rate of 4.9. The student dropout rate at Central Haywood High School was reportedly 20.5% in 1997-98 (the most recent year for which data were available), which the school administration attributes to students failing to meet district attendance requirements established by the Board of Education.

Scoring a mean of 1011, 58.4% of the county's students took the SAT in 1999. Although fewer students than North Carolina's 61% took the test, the county's mean score can be favorably compared to the State's mean score of 986. Of all high school students who took End-of-Course tests in 1999, 67.3% of Haywood County's population scored at or above a level of proficiency compared to 60.1% at the State level.

During the academic year 1998-99, the majority of students at Central Haywood were enrolled in the ninth grade, and male students outnumbered females by a two to one ratio. The school's enrollment is predominantly Caucasian, reflective of the county's demographic composition. CHHS administrators have identified approximately 20% of the student body as meeting the eligibility requirements for classification as students with special needs.

PHILOSOPHY AND MISSION

Central Haywood High School currently serves students in grades nine through twelve, and is guided by its original mission of "...providing a student-centered curriculum that meets the needs of students with diverse abilities, problems, backgrounds, and concerns." Accompanying the provision of a student-centered curriculum is the recognition that many students appear unable to succeed in a traditional school setting. CHHS attempts to overcome this barrier by providing smaller class sizes and individualized attention. In fact, these two characteristics are seen by school administration and staff as integral to the school's effectiveness. Central Haywood has six major articulated goals that serve as driving forces for its programmatic format: (a) development of citizenship skills; (b) development of career competencies and responsibilities; (c) provision of a relevant curriculum; (d) enhancement of personal growth and fitness; (e) involvement of the community in the "educational challenge"; and (f) recruitment and support of a caring and capable staff.

The school's instructional methodology requires flexibility, patience, and innovation, and the presentation of curriculum must capture students' attention by being relevant, experiential, and hands-on. Administrators and faculty alike believe that it is necessary at times to depart from strict adherence to lesson plans in order to address more pressing issues that might require immediate attention. It was noted by several faculty that Central Haywood's students are a special group who learn best through a combination of individualized instruction and social skills development--who have the ability but lack self-esteem. According to one teacher, "The school must seek to heal emotional states as well as to make students productive members of society. Three years ago, the school addressed behaviors without too much success. Now, faculty members try to circumvent episodes before they escalate."

Since its establishment in 1994, the school has made modifications from time to time to both its curriculum and its expectations for student performance. Needed changes were made to strengthen the probability of attaining the school's goals but did not represent a wholesale revision of purpose or scope. According to one respondent, the effort at first was to make kids happy, but the kids took advantage. Teachers felt that they were probably too loose and sensed that they had to make kids realize a need for structure and a need to work more for grades. The school initiated character education, instituted an attendance policy, and made scheduling improvements. Administration and staff concur that the school has consistently sought to raise academic and behavioral standards during its years of existence. Most of those interviewed credited the process of continuous change with the school's attainment of "exemplary growth" status for the 1997-1998 school year. In fact, according to the Superintendent, growth at Central Haywood in 1997-98 exceeded that of the other two high schools in the county according to the standards established by the State of North Carolina's ABC's Program.

ORGANIZATION, STRUCTURE AND FUNDING

Although Central Haywood originally served middle-school students, this feature of the program was dropped to enable an exclusive focus on the secondary level. The school has an administrative staff of three, including its principal, an assistant principal, and one administrative assistant. Seven faculty comprise the school's regular instructional staff, including one teacher each for Social Studies, Science, Mathematics, and English, and three additional staff who have Health/Physical Education, Special Education, and Media responsibilities. Professional support services are provided by a school psychologist, guidance counselor, and school social worker. Additional personnel, including a special project director, substance abuse counselor, and school nurse are available to students through outside agency support.

CHHS also makes use of resources available in the community to provide supplemental instructional staff. In 1998-1999 adjunct instructors offered classes in the areas of Art, Music, and Criminal Justice. Regular

instruction that meets State-established core course requirements allows students to attain four credits in English, three credits each in Science, Mathematics, and Social Studies, and one credit each in Health/Physical Education, Arts, and Vocational Education. Sixty-nine percent of the school's graduates have attended college (either 2- or 4-year), a rate that favorably compares with those of the two feeder schools in the county (60% and 75% respectively). Central Haywood has established additional remedial courses in competency math and reading in an effort to assist students who still need to acquire skills necessary to pass competency tests required for graduation.

Resources of Haywood Community College are drawn upon for providing courses that enrich the curriculum and respond to student needs and interests. During the 1998-1999 academic year, faculty from the College provided courses in Music and Criminal Justice. Course opportunities were available for students age 16 and over through dual enrollment, a collaborative program through which high school and college credit can be earned concurrently. In addition, students have the opportunity to learn skills at Haywood Community College in such vocational courses as auto mechanics, cosmetology, and carpentry at the same time they are completing an academic program leading to a high school diploma at Haywood Central High School. As one teacher noted, "Central Haywood is different from regular school because teachers have to 'revisit, revisit'. Expectations for students in the program are that they will get a high school diploma and learn to deal in society as team players."

Service learning projects are a distinguishing feature of the school's program that give students the opportunity to work with all age groups and be involved in a variety of service projects that assist the local community. The ultimate goal of involving at-risk students in community projects is to equip them with the skills they need to survive each time they meet obstacles in life. Service/Learning Projects also support the development of feelings of self-worth, community spirit, and students' senses of empowerment as they set and work toward the attainment of life's goals. All students participate in once-a-week activities that are designed to integrate them into the larger community through the provision of meaningful volunteer activities. Students are divided into small groups (generally numbering between 5 and 7), each of which is directed by a member of the school's staff. They participate in such diverse activities as visiting nursing homes, volunteering in soup kitchens, working with Habitat for Humanity, and tutoring students in elementary schools.

Project Pursuit is another notable element of Central Haywood's program. This initiative is designed to teach new skills, improve school and home attitudes and performance, and diminish involvement with juvenile services or law enforcement agencies. Through this contracted service which provides therapeutic recreational programming geared toward building self esteem, students are expected to improve communication skills and enhance their awareness of social and community support resources. With strong reliance on personal counseling and organized outings in an outside environment, the program affords an opportunity for closer student-staff-resource interaction than would be possible in a classroom setting. Project Pursuit is integrated with the school's service learning component, and weekly volunteer service activities are incorporated into the program.

Central Haywood's admissions process follows a general pattern in which students are recommended by the principal of the feeder schools for placement. It is often necessary for students to be placed on a waiting list until space becomes available for them, however. Entry into the program is based on poor academic performance and/or student suspensions. While school personnel are cognizant that the needs of at-risk students may require different and more flexible instructional approaches, the school maintains the same academic and behavioral standards as other schools in the system. Once students are enrolled at CHHS, they are allowed to stay as long as they wish and/or as long as satisfactory conduct is maintained.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Shared Philosophy and Approach

Capable administrative leadership was repeatedly cited by those interviewed as a key element in the program's success. Commitment and continuity on the part of Central's Haywood's administration, combined with a willingness to modify program elements and processes when necessary, were identified by teachers, district personnel, parents, and community respondents as major contributors to success. A Board Member summarized the leadership issue: "An alternative program must include a strong administration that is not bullish or dictatorial, but

strong enough to have the respect of faculty and students. There must be a staff that is willing to adjust to an alternative type of environment and a facility in which kids can feel comfortable."

Student Focused, Individualized Learning Approach

The opportunities for in-depth counseling with students both within and outside the classroom. environment were noted as special features of the program, as was the establishment of a comfortable, homelike, safe atmosphere in an academic environment conducive to individual student learning styles. The relatively small student/teacher ratio was cited as a positive component, although the need for additional faculty, professional staff, and curricular diversity was noted by several respondents.

According to one student, "Kids at Haywood do just as much work but at a different rate. Teachers don't push students until they're overwhelmed. In regular school, students can't concentrate in the big classrooms. Here, the largest class size is 16. I made my first A in English after making straight F's in regular school. Some people call Central Haywood 'Criminal High'--it gets a bad rap. But it's not so. People just hear about it more because it's smaller." Students all agreed that they would like to stay at Central Haywood until graduation. "There are no groups at Central and students are not categorized. We actually look forward to getting up and coming. The key word at Central is *personalized*."

Another student noted that "the purpose of Central Haywood is to give people a chance. There is more freedom for students like the ones with ADD and ADHD who are not '*sit still, be quiet*' types of kids. There is a caring faculty. It's different from regular school because students aren't pushed past their limits as long as they're working. In regular school, if kids get behind they get kicked out. Central Haywood is like a family--students argue but they have fun."

Community Connections

Interviews conducted with parents, students, and community representatives in addition to school and district personnel elicited the widely shared consensus that Central Haywood has achieved a high degree of community connectedness, visibility, and support within the relatively short time of its existence. Respondents reported that in the beginning there was a strong undercurrent of opposition to the establishment of an alternative school in the county. Questions were raised concerning the expenditure of funds such a venture would require, especially in light of the county's closing of an elementary school. Interview participants also indicated that there was a most unfavorable view of the target student population for such a school, with many in the community viewing them as potential criminals at best.

Participants in the evaluation process indicated that negative attitudes changed relatively quickly due to the active involvement of the school with the community through its service learning program. Haywood Central High School's designation as a school of "exemplary growth" through North Carolina's ABC's program was cited as further enhancing the school's acceptance among the general population, as were favorable graduation and promotion rates. As the district's Assistant Superintendent observed, "The school has moved from a rather perilous beginning (in terms of community support) to a point where it will grant its own diplomas and have its own school colors in the coming year. The community's perspective appears to have evolved from one of grudging acceptance to ownership mingled with pride."

A local Rotarian was vocally supportive. "We all benefit from Central Haywood. There is a direct benefit for the students, but society also benefits because there are no nonperformers hanging out on the streets." Following up with a story, the Rotarian shared a personal experience with one of the school's students during the holiday season. "I asked a student to ring the bell with me for the Salvation Army. As we talked, I learned that the child's mother was a crack addict and there was no father. When the mother was hospitalized, community gossip became unbearable for the child. Ultimately, through help from the community, this child went to Washington on a leadership program and even took a course at Haywood Community College for dual credit making a B. At Haywood Central, students like this are with others of like spirit who understand. Some live in poverty and have no clothes, but they come into an environment where they are comfortable. Kids need to be accepted based on something other than superficiality."

ISSUES AND NEEDS

Additional Courses and Staff

Many respondents expressed a desire for expanded course offerings at CHHS. Administrators and instructional staff felt that the addition of a vocational course sequence, with appropriate facilities such as a machine/auto repair shop would considerably enhance the school's ability to serve the county's population of at-risk youth. It was noted that physical limitations have previously precluded the school from enrolling all who might benefit, especially toward the middle of each semester when waiting periods for recommended students are generally the longest. Students also suggested a daycare center so that teen mothers could get back into school. In addition to the need for additional facilities and courses, several students interviewed expressed the desire for athletic and other school activities that would serve as both recreational outlets and symbols of school pride.

Instructional staff noted that their qualifications are adequate for offering core courses, but that too often staff are assigned to teach electives in which they have little interest or expertise. Several suggested that a change in the school's scheduling of classes might help, as would greater participation by students in planning their own coursework. Several staff suggested that the addition of a full-time in-school suspension teacher, a SIMS operator, a full-time psychologist, and auxiliary staff to teach single courses would result in needed improvements.

Enhanced Education and Training

Several teachers interviewed reported that their formal educational preparation was of little direct help in preparing them to teach in an alternative school setting such as Central Haywood. One teacher said that she learned more during her first three years of teaching in an alternative setting than she did during all of her years in formal education adding that, "...until you've been there, you don't have a clue." The scarcity of professional development activities was a concern. Teachers were complimentary of alternative education conferences, the Teacher Academy, and other selected activities because they tend to draw alternative teachers from around the State and region together. One respondent expressed the opinion that assessment measures need to be brought up to date to correspond to the realities of alternative teaching; in her words: "...we need to bring Raleigh into the loop. If we are supposed to be teaching alternatively, we need to test alternatively as well...."

JACKSON COUNTY DISCOVERY II AND NEW MILLENNIUM

BACKGROUND

Discovery II is an alternative high school serving students in grades 9 to 12 who have been identified as greatly at risk for school failure or dropout due to disruptive behavior, poor attendance, or multiple suspensions for violation of school rules. The development of Discovery II grew out of a recognition on the part of school district leaders that many students were spending their high school years with little or no evidence of purpose, thus facing the risk of expulsion or otherwise leaving secondary school lacking sufficient credits for graduation.

New Millennium is another alternative program operated by Jackson County Schools. It began in February 1999 and, thus, was in operation only a short time when the review team visited. It is directed toward middle grade students who are similar academically and behaviorally to the older students served by Discovery II.

In Spring, 1999, Discovery II had an enrollment of 14 students and New Millennium was serving five students. Both programs are overseen by the district's director of exceptional children's services and alternative learning, with each having an on-site director.

In 1998-99 the programs were located between Sylva and Cullowhee on the second floors of adjacent buildings off a dirt roadway in the midst of some small businesses. The buildings are of wood and cinderblock construction. Inside there are several smallish rooms arranged somewhat like an apartment; each has a sitting room that serves as the main gathering place for students. There are also other rooms used for instructional purposes. In the case of New Millennium, students have individual work stations in one or the other of two rooms. These work stations serve as their "personal spaces." Walls are painted, and are adorned with posters and other art work. In one case, a Discovery II student had drawn a display on a wall that also served as part of her academic work portfolio. Although, initially, the facilities seemed to be rather dingy to the first time visitor, it could be sensed from what they said that students look upon their school as "home," a safe place, quite different from what they experienced in regular schools. It evident to the visitor that these facilities help support the family atmosphere that many of the students say means so much to them.

Jackson County is located in North Carolina's southwest region, bordering partially on both South Carolina and Georgia. This mountainous, rural county has a population of about 30,000. The largest town is county seat of Sylva, with a population of just over 1,800. About 28 percent of the total county population is under twenty years of age and 15 percent over the age of sixty-five. The average annual wage per worker in 1997 was nearly \$20,500, about three-quarters of the state average. The largest source of income for county workers is government and government enterprises--about 18 percent of the total income (with two-thirds of that amount from state government work). A close second is service businesses and industries, more than half of which is from health services. Manufacturing and transportation together with wholesale and retail trade account for about 15 percent of the county's personal income. Two state post-secondary educational institutions are located in Jackson County--Western Carolina University in Cullowhee and Southwestern Community College in Sylva.

Jackson County Schools had a student membership of just over 3,500 in 1998-99, a total that has remained relatively constant for several years. Nearly 88 percent are White, nine percent American Indian, 2 percent Black, and the remainder Hispanic and other minorities. The district had a total of six regular schools in 1998-99, four which are Grade PK or K through Grade 8, one which is Grades PK-12, and one which is Grades 9-12. Per pupil expenditures from local funds are about 87 percent of the state average for expenditures from local funds; the average teacher salary supplement from local funds is about one-eighth of the state average teacher salary supplement from local funds. Forty percent of the district's students are eligible for free or reduced price lunches, only slightly more than the total for the state as a whole. In 1998-99, almost 80 percent of students in grades 3-8 performed at or above grade level on state end-of-grade tests, and nearly 64 percent of high school students scored at or above Level III (proficient) on one or more state end-of-course tests. About 78 percent of students took the Scholastic Assessment Tests in 1998-99, compared to the state total of 61 percent, with an average combined score of 996, somewhat higher than the state average of 986. Average daily attendance for the district was 94.7 percent

(94.8 percent statewide). At 5.6 percent overall, the dropout rate for 1997-98 was higher than the state rate of 4.9 percent. The number of violent incidents per 1,000 students in 1997-98 was 5.8, less than the state total of 6.3.

Although the southwestern region of North Carolina experiences significant problems related to geography and a relatively low level of wealth, it has a long and rich history of collaboration among public and private agencies, institutions and businesses. The public schools in Jackson County have often benefited from this collaboration.

PHILOSOPHY AND MISSION

Development of an alternative program was initiated when the county was informed of the availability of a grant from the Department of Public Instruction. At the time the request for proposals was received from DPI, there was a high degree of teacher and student frustration over troublesome and unsuccessful young people who were spending years in high school without earning sufficient credits to graduate. In addition, some of these students had a tendency to be disruptive and were, therefore, subject to multiple suspensions during the year.

Two years earlier, the county had unsuccessfully designed an option for middle school children of the same description. The program failed primarily because it was used as a “holding pen” or “dumping ground” with no fundamental programmatic base. With the potential of a new grant for alternative learning, and a history of a program that didn’t work, representatives of community agencies came together to creatively design a project that was intended, above all, to be different, based on the needs of kids, and designed to excite disinterested students to the joys of learning.

Discovery II, then, is the outcome of this effort-- a collaborative effort including the district’s director of exceptional children’s services and alternative learning, a faculty member from Western Carolina University, a juvenile court counselor, and a then staff member of the counseling center (now a member of the school district’s staff). It was designed to be a program much different than traditional schooling. Developers were of the opinion that a project that involved only smaller teacher/student ratios and a separate facility, but not addressing changes in methodology, would result in the mere re-creation of a setting in which students were already failing. Based on this premise, Discovery II was designed, in the words of the developers, “to be a traveling, experiential, voluntary, interdisciplinary, hands-on program in which faculty members act as facilitators.” Students display their mastery of each objective in portfolios which may include, but are not limited to, still photography, video, art, theatre, music, oral and/or written presentations. Typical students selected for participation are those who have perhaps spent three years in the ninth grade and have achieved only one or two credits, who are absent 30-40 days per semester, who display noncompliant behaviors that have resulted in multiple suspensions, who most likely will drop out of school on their 16th birthdays, and/or who have failed to pass any of the required state end-of-course tests.

Similarly, New Millennium was developed in response to meet the needs of middle grade students who do not seem fit into the regular school program. School district leaders looked to the success of Discovery II in designing the program for the younger students. It was reasoned that by getting these students into a different environment and by helping them channel what can be described as “excess energy” into productive directions, a positive educational experience would result.

Designers of Discovery II and New Millennium see that the types of students served by these programs often share one common denominator: a gnawing sense of inadequacy and failure within the regular classroom. A sense of futility, ineptitude, and purposelessness can be exacerbated by constant negative feedback from parents, teachers and peers. Such feedback often results in avoiding, nonparticipatory, and sometimes angry, defensive behavior. In some cases, the regular school environment has become a barrier to students’ senses of personal self worth and is a constant reminder of their failure to succeed within its boundaries. A lack of apparent accomplishment or purpose frequently results in a resignation to failure. In response, many such students seek ways to control, or master, their environment through whatever means are available to them to establish some sense of identity or purpose, whether infamous or meritorious. This can be substantiated by the fact that half of those targeted for service under these programs are already court-involved youth. The designers of these programs have

attempted to keep in mind that these are the types of life experiences that students must be helped to get beyond if the programs are to be successful.

Guiding both Discovery II and New Millennium is the belief shared by administrators and staff that a student-centered approach, entailing respect for the needs of students and capitalizing on their interests, is necessary for program success. The staff recognizes, as one person put it, that "...if we treat students as though they have already become what we want them to be, they will have a greater chance of becoming exactly that." Both programs entail a strong commitment to an interdisciplinary, interagency approach, seeing such an approach as essential in addressing the multifaceted problems and barriers faced by many students the programs serve. The development of a safe, non-threatening environment within which students can thrive as they "discover" the richness of their world both outside and within is seen as integral to program and student success.

PROGRAM ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

Admission to both Discovery II and New Millennium is by referral, and, by implication, is not for everyone. Administrators at the referring schools choose students they feel can benefit from the program, although referrals can be made by other people as well. Referrals include such items as family history, court involvement, and parent information along with school performance, and are sent to the projects' overall director and on-site leaders. After referral is made, students must apply to attend, writing a short essay about why they want to be accepted. Then, the referred student goes to the program to observe and be observed for two days. Staff and students already attending the programs are involved in the acceptance process. Each newly admitted student signs an individual contract specifying commitments about both personal behavior and academic work.

Discovery II approaches the curriculum in a variety of ways. Students may be taking different courses at any one time. They are given copies of the goals and objectives for the North Carolina Standard Course of Study for any course they take. They keep it, along with their work for that course, in a portfolio. As students work their way through a course, they check off each objective and goal as they are mastered. Mastery may be demonstrated in multiple ways, including writing stories, poems, essays, creating artwork, and taking pictures.

A highly individualized environment, there are few formal classes or lectures. It is up to the students, with adult tutoring and support, to prepare themselves to pass their state end-of-course tests. In addition to certified part-time teachers who provide individual guidance, grade student work, and answer questions, tutors are available to provide help in special areas. Teaching Fellows from Western Carolina University are among the tutorial sources.

Field trips are a core activity of Discovery II, and they are planned by the whole group. Students have been to Washington, DC, Gettysburg, Raleigh, the North Carolina Zoo in Asheboro, the Knoxville Aquarium, as well as local sites. In the spring of 1999, students accompanied by teachers and other adults, went to San Francisco to make a presentation about the program to a meeting of the National School Boards Association. As examples of linking field trips with the curriculum, students went on two trips that tracked the life cycles respectively for trees and for human beings. They first visited Joyce Kilmer National Forest, followed by a paper factory and a recycling operation. For the study of the human cycle, they visited a birthing center, followed by a retirement home and a cemetery. Some initial skepticism about the field trips was voiced. A parent said, "One thing I was skeptical about at first was their having a good time--going on trip after trip. I was thinking about the teaching I had. But all these special trips, if they are a reward for learning or a part of learning, they are all a tool for learning--but not the whole thing. How they showed credibility that the trips did what they were supposed to do was afterwards. I saw a lot of long hours in the classroom."

On days that do not include a field trip, students work in the classroom on academics, study skills, communication skills, or interpersonal skills. Every day begins and ends with group meetings in which issues are dealt with, and the day's activities are planned. The only venture out of the classroom is to the high school for lunch.

Although the academic environment is not structured in the traditional manner, there are clear rules for expected behavior. Absences are limited to no more than five days per semester. Fighting is not tolerated. A major

goal of the program is to teach a type of problem solving that does not lead to other problems. The whole group meets to decide how to deal with rule-breaking. As one staff member put it, "In some situations the group is better at addressing the problem. Some students are very adept at working things out and confronting each other." However, the staff has veto power. As a rule, anyone who does something wrong must rectify the problem.

Staff approach to changing behaviors tends to rely on positive reinforcement as well as natural consequences. "We thought about taking things away, like trips and privileges," one said, "but we don't want to take educational stuff away." Discipline is seen as a process. The focus is more on positive reinforcement for desired behavior, rather than multiple penalties. Students have permission to make mistakes. Staff do not expect perfection, but they do expect an effort toward excellence.

One feature of the New Millennium program structure is that students spend the first hour of the day at their home schools for specialized instruction in math and reading and are then transported to the alternative site. The lead teacher expressed appreciation to the home school principals for help they have given, especially as relates to transportation, and for leaving disciplinary matters to the discretion of the New Millennium staff. Although the state standard course of study is followed, with emphasis on what is to be tested, a wilderness setting is often used as the basis for all kinds of instruction and learning. Students commented on the hikes they have taken, learning about trees, animal tracks, water creatures, and the like as they made their way. They noted especially a rafting trip they took on the Nantahala River. The focus of instruction is on social studies, science, English, mathematics, and physical education. Students range from grades five to eight.

Funds to operate the programs come primarily from two sources. Discovery II receives about \$80,000 per year from state at-risk funds, from which some of the staff are paid; exceptional children's funds pay for the site leader since she is trained as a social worker. Some funds for trips have been donated by the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation/Harrah's Casino. Both staff members at New Millennium are paid from exceptional children's funds. None of the state's funds based on average daily membership, the basis for most state support of public schools, "follow" the students into the alternative education budget.

PROMISING PRACTICES

New Millennium was still in its infancy at the time visitors reviewed the program, so assessment of program effectiveness is premature. Nonetheless, given the shared philosophical orientation upon which both it and Discovery II are based, program characteristics of the latter may well be expected to characterize the continued development of the newer program.

Shared Philosophy and Approach

"To give the students something to do, someone to love, and something to hope for," was the vision expressed by the first on-site leader of Discovery II, Glen Jacobs, when the program started four years ago. This statement was repeated to visitors almost word for word by virtually all staff members interviewed.

According to teachers in Discovery II, the program may fluctuate somewhat each semester when new students are brought in, but overall it is the same from semester to semester--students are there to be helped to learn and to solve personal problems--to be given something to do, someone to love, and something to hope for. When the program does adjust, they say, it tries to adjust to the needs of the students who are there at the time.

It was noted by one teacher that the program is "therapeutic," and that a lot of trust goes into it. Frequently, students are accustomed to an approach taken in regular schools that students must work to earn trust. Here, it is a given that they are trustworthy unless they prove themselves to be otherwise. Nothing is taken away from them (the students) unless they have done something to deserve it, teachers say.

Another teacher said, "Most important is a compassionate and caring attitude. You can't fake it. These young people will know. We could have a certified teacher or an uncertified teacher; the acid test is the classroom. The severest critics are the students and they are excellent judges of human character."

A parent commented, "My daughter couldn't make it in regular school. She couldn't do it. But Discovery changed her. Classroom work is different; they spend more time with her helping her do her work; and, there are more opportunities for me to get involved with her schooling. I visit school now and show her I'm interested. My son, who is regular school, has to open a book to learn about things; my daughter, who is in Discovery, has been able to go to the places he reads about."

Another teacher observed that, "They (the staff) want the children to 'own' the program. They make changes as they go along, if some things don't work. They have rules and regulations--this is not play time."

Students, themselves, emphasize the family atmosphere that is present, that staff members are like parents in that they sit down with students to talk and listen. They point to "learning together," "doing things your way," that "no two days are alike," and to educational trips ("they really are educational!") as examples of the way the program works. Thus, in these words, they confirm that Discovery II and New Millennium are operationally in sync with the professed program philosophies.

Faculty Competence, Collaboration, and Cohesiveness

"The teachers themselves are the most important part of the program," said a parent. "They give their support and time."

Each program has a staff made up of persons with varied backgrounds and experience. For example, although certified teachers come to the program to make academic assessments of the students, the on-going teaching staff of New Millennium is composed of two persons who do not have official teaching credentials--they both are school social workers, selected based on their past experience. But, the principal of one of the feeder schools remarked that the New Millennium teacher has taken every suggestion from regular school teachers and has followed through. There is a lot of communication, he said.

The four-member staff of Discovery II (supplemented by part-time teachers and volunteer tutors) is composed of persons with backgrounds in teaching, social work, and psychology. In explaining how he happened to come to work at the program, one person said, "I just got lucky. I worked with problem solving, neglect, and abuse on the Indian reservation and got burned out with the bureaucracy. Then I heard about this job."

"I have an interest in these students," said another. "Parks and recreation (where he was formerly employed) focuses a lot on at-risk kids. I get satisfaction from seeing them later."

Still another staff member said, "I have always had a place in my heart for these kinds of young people. I probably was one of them."

The staff member with the greatest amount of experience commented, "I was an aging, non-traditional teacher in the system...I had some at-risk students previously and was marginally successful. I had been an at-risk student, and I began to see myself in them. They don't regard me as their teacher, but as one of them."

"Any teacher would be privileged and honored to have these students. They give so much. They are like a family."

The superintendent in commenting about the importance of the particular people employed by the projects said, "You can't just buy these people--you have to find them."

One member of the writing team, in recalling the first days of Discovery II, noted that "...when we were in the hiring process the project director told us to forget about certification--we'd deal with that later. She said she wanted us to find people who share a dream. That makes what comes out a different kind of program. There were some hurt feelings from regular teachers who applied. When asked to dream, they couldn't."

Student Focused, Individualized Learning Approach

The teaching staff says it focuses on personalized, small group instruction, integrating topics from one subject to another and allowing spin-offs from the original topics. One teacher said, "Especially with new students, if it looked, smelled, tasted like education, they didn't want it. We had to disguise it and make it fun, for example, teaching history through storytelling...if we had opened a book first we would have lost them."

The curricular approach, then, can be described as eclectic. Students have the state standard course of study goals and objectives in their notebooks and can start anywhere they want to start. They have to show they understand the objectives and can incorporate as many into one project as they can manage, as long as they can justify to the staff how they fit. Teaching staff use individual interests as much as possible in helping students learn concepts. Portfolios are evaluated every two weeks, with faculty giving a great deal of one-on-one attention. At the end students decide what goes in their portfolios for grading purposes.

Grades are assigned by a teacher certified to teach the content in question, using a rubric to score portfolio contents along with informal discussions about the contents with the students. Daily progress and class participation are also considered. Passing state end-of-course tests is required for those subjects included in the State ABC's Program. Staff reported that Discovery II students have scored well on these tests.

Students noted that they have choices here, that "you can do it your own way," but that standards are high. Absences can be made up by community service on a student's own time, but one student said, "Who wants to be absent when you have a program like this?"

A school board member commented that, "The program fortifies basic needs that they are lacking in their lives--either not a home to go into or they don't want to go into. It's not the trips that are the key to success--it's the family, a place to belong, with the direction and discipline that comes with that--the group processing they do every day. We lose track of how important those things are. The program gives them some success and builds on that."

Community Connections

One important community connection developed by Discovery II is in the instructional arena. For example, volunteers, teach and tutor students in foreign languages under the direction of a foreign language teacher at the regular high school. Also, North Carolina Teaching Fellows from Western Carolina University provide volunteer tutoring. Southwestern Community College allows dual enrollment in some instructional areas, and some students earn credits toward college degrees while they are completing their high school requirements.

The site leader at Discover II noted that students work with the local Council on Aging in a program called "Share Life Experiences" once a week, and help with a monthly mailing for that organization. Community service projects occur three or four times per semester, and there is regular participation in an Adopt-A-Highway clean-up project. One teacher, however, observed that he would like to see more community service activities for students. A New Millennium staff member remarked that service learning thus far only involves his students working in a laboring capacity, for example, at the Food Bank. He would like to be able have students do more in the future, such as seeing the Food Bank process all the way through to the recipients of the food.

The retired superintendent coordinates what he calls a "shadow" program which provides opportunities for students to follow local business people and professionals to learn more about the adult working world.

The project director expressed her feeling that existing community linkages are good, but pointed to an alternative program in another county where students deliver meals-on-wheels to 80 persons each week. "In that case," she said, "the impact is greater because the community service is continuous (and personal)--continuous commitment to service is a key." She said she will be exploring a similar approach to community service in the future for Discovery II and New Millennium.

Communication/Coordination with the District Administration and County School Board

One teacher observed that in the main the administration is very supportive and at times has defended the program. The school board is also supportive, he said. "I don't think that we've asked for something and not gotten it. But, there is also often a 'wait and see' factor which is part of how education works. 'We'll have to see how the budget turns out.' "

A project writing team member observed that the school board is "...now proud (of the program) but it was a grudging acceptance;" the superintendent acknowledged that the amount of money spent has been a sore point (with the Board), but that it has turned around somewhat since learning more about the project.

During a meeting with interviewers, school board members themselves expressed a variety of opinions about the projects and what they believe their purposes to be. They agreed that at the start the Board wasn't too involved because it is a grant program; however, as one member said, "...now that it is successful, the Board has to figure out how to expand it, and it's getting down to the wire."

Board members observed that the programs are controversial--issues have been raised about the extra money required, the number of students and how they are selected, and the skepticism of some regular school teachers about the programs. Comments from individual Board members included these:

- "The right kinds of kids are getting in, but lots more need it."
- " 'Kids are getting rewarded because they don't fit in' is a perception we don't know how to get around."
- "If you took a poll of professional staff and the public, they would vote against it."
- "Kids who are performing well usually have the things these kids don't."
- "The biggest criticism is that there are a lot of students who wish they could get to be in it, but we have only 15-20 slots. Originally students in the program were to return to the regular schools."
- "These are not 'bad kids,' but they get labeled from kindergarten. When someone else is successful in teaching these students, it slams into the face of their regular teachers that they didn't do it."
- "The biggest thing we see is that many of the students who are dying to get in the program are very successful students. Maybe our whole system needs to do more hands-on, experiential kinds of education."

Disagreements and differences of opinion about various aspects of the programs were expressed by Board members during the interview. One view held that the alternative programs should be separate and apart from regular school buildings because, in the regular school, the students are labeled if they are taken out of the regular classroom for specialized instruction. A counter view held that the alternative types of instruction can be done in the regular classroom and expressed disagreement that labeling is a problem. Another comment was, "Other kids in the regular classroom will have more opportunities to learn when disruptive students are removed." One Board member had heard from some teachers who say "give me 10-12 kids and I can help, too;" a response to that comment was "it depends on the teacher." In answer to the statement that the county has gotten away from the original plan to have students at the alternative program return to the regular school, another Board member said, "Kids don't want to go back. They are afraid to go back into a situation in which they failed, when the situation itself hasn't changed." One person observed that "Discovery gives hope," and then asked, "how can we give it to others?" A suggestion offered in response was, "If we could intervene earlier, like with New Millennium, we wouldn't have as great a need in high school."

In recognition of the Board's own role with respect to alternative education, a member noted that, "The Board didn't design what alternative education is in Jackson County. Some want to broaden the program and say we are serving far too few students. Although we get a lot of accolades for this program, there is concern about others who need the program. Our focus has been on the high school, but we need to go to the elementary school before we've lost them."

EXPRESSED ISSUES AND NEEDS

Additional Courses and Staff

Since neither of the New Millennium staff members have credentials as educators, they expressed a desire to have a certified teacher on hand for that program, although they don't think it is likely to occur because of the lack of finances. A Discovery II teacher said, "We have been able to do it, but it is not ideal. It is very stressful. What we have is patchwork. What would be more manageable would be if we had a consistent, full-time core staff."

The Discovery II site leader expressed the need for a science lab and a social worker "...to help us on connecting services. We must deal with behaviors before we can help the student reach full academic potential." Parents also called for "at least" one more staff person at Discovery II, as well as for incentives to ensure that all staff members stay with the program.

The project director took a different view, however, commenting that when taking volunteers into account, the number of instructional staff members "couldn't be better." Similarly, she said that the number of support staff members is adequate and that, if needed more could be obtained through flexible use of resources. She went on to say that educators traditionally think that to have a new course you have to hire a teacher. Instead, she said, if the program wanted to teach carpentry, for example, they might create a project and pull in a retired carpenter to teach the course. "Often folks are willing to give of their time if we ask them. We asked a retired chemistry professor from Western Carolina University to help manage our chemistry lab. All the students in the course passed the state end-of-course test in chemistry, which is also necessary for admission to a state university. We also have a photographer here who is published in *Southern Living* and who loves to work with students. All we have to do is make use of all the resources in the community."

Modifications to Program Administration

The most frequently suggested program modification essentially called for "more." That was expressed in a variety of ways.

When asked what is the one thing they would change about the program, one Board member said, "Find more money to have more programs." Another said, "Nothing, except make it better than it is--involve more teachers by using the program as a form of staff development--especially those teachers who criticize it. Let them go in and teach awhile and see how the students and teachers are doing, thinking, feeling. See if they can carry back something with them. There are more ways to teach than from a book. Learning takes place in many forms."

The superintendent said he would like to have two units of Discovery II--separate programs, but with a working connection in some way. He also noted that with New Millennium, the district is now working with middle grade students in a way similar to Discovery II--in reflecting upon a high number of dropouts in the district, he said, "If we had something earlier like New Millennium we would lose less."

A teacher said what is needed is "...expansion with sufficient staff and facilities--maybe some experimentation to see what we're missing. We're working against our limits now with our fragmented staff."

One of the project developers sounded a cautionary note. "You want more kids involved, on the one hand, but you don't want to screw things up, either. We need another branch (of Discovery II) to accommodate more students, but if it gets big and enrolls 50-60 students, it won't work. It would be a warehouse."

Along another line, several teachers said they would like to see improvement in transportation and transportation equipment, both to and from the programs daily (long rides reduce the amount of time for some students at the program) and for field trips. Time spent on transportation issues by staff could be better used for something more directly related to program goals.

In commenting on the frequency of public appearances by students to talk about the program, one Discovery II student said, "The program has become too political--they (the administration) are so concerned about the image they lose sight of who we are; we feel like we're being put on display."

Maintaining/Fostering Effective Political Relationships

As noted earlier in this report, the programs have been seen by School Board members as being controversial, and they have received criticism as well as strong support from various members of the School Board, the ultimate political forum in which the futures of Discovery II and New Millennium will be determined. Some improvement in the relationships between the programs and the Board seem to have taken place over time, as Board members hear reports about academic behavioral gains made by students while they are attending the programs.

Several persons interviewed pointed out that news media coverage, while not extensive over time, has been positive. Some pointed to recent articles describing Discovery II and attention the program has received, especially the student presentation to the National School Boards Association. "Our media is positive," said the retired superintendent, "...I don't know of a negative editorial or slam on the program at all."

Parents of students in the programs are very supportive according to staff members and many of the parents interviewed by the visiting team. They may become some of the most valuable allies in helping the community at large (and, ultimately, the political leadership) hear about how the programs have helped their children.

Enhanced Education and Training

Instructional staff expressed different perspectives of the degree to which their formal education prepared them for teaching in an alternative setting. One who was trained a psychologist believed his undergraduate schooling proved to be the "O.K." as preparation for working with the young people in Discovery II. Another instructor said he was not quite sure if and how formal education helped him to teach in this program. A third was more emphatic: "Most formal education taught me what not to do...It is important for the instructor to have fun doing the work, to experiment, and to listen to the students."

With respect to continuing professional development, one teacher observed that, "...most professional development is helpful. If it works, it works--but, most the professional development we go to wouldn't work here. What we get from students is the way we need to be teaching them....the Discovery II program is our best teacher."

According to the staff, these students pick their own teachers for the most part (part-time instructors and tutors). "They pick some good ones and teach them how they need to be taught." As noted earlier, some of these instructors come from the high school, the Teaching Fellows Program, retired university professors, and the community. Staff members say they also pick and choose guest speakers from that pool.

One staff member summed up the most useful continuing education received by the faculty as, "Every day is a professional development day!"

WAKE COUNTY MOUNT VERNON REDIRECTION MIDDLE SCHOOL

BACKGROUND

Mount Vernon Redirection Middle School, located in Raleigh, North Carolina, is an alternative school within the Wake County school district. It serves students in grades six through eight who have demonstrated academic and/or behavioral difficulties which hinder their successful education in more traditional school settings. The school has been in existence for approximately two decades; while it has served continually as an alternative school during this time, there have been changes both in the grade levels and types of students served, as well as in the educational approaches employed at the site. Under the direction of a full-time principal, the alternative school is located in a building complex on the west side of Raleigh, a setting which is geographically centered within Wake County. The campus on which the school is located contains several older buildings some of which have been, or are in the process of being, renovated, as well as several facilities that have been condemned. Mt. Vernon Redirection moved into a new building on the campus late in the 1998-99 school year; however, when planned, it was designated by school policy as a replacement building rather than a new facility. Consequently, only the same amount of space provided in the former facility is included in the new building, rather than having the new space designed to meet expanding needs. Accordingly, in addition to the new building, Mr. Vernon Redirection utilizes some space in an adjacent, older building.

Wake County is the largest county in the burgeoning Research Triangle metropolitan region of central North Carolina. Its fast growing population of over 560,000 residents places enrollment pressures on the school district and may have an impact on the ability of Mt. Vernon Redirection to address the needs of all the students for whom it is intended to serve. There are twelve municipalities in Wake County, with Raleigh--the county seat as well as the capital of North Carolina--by far the most populous, with over half the county's residents living within the city limits. The local economy is broadly diverse in terms of sources of personal income: Services, including business, health, and engineering/management, account for about one-quarter of the county's personal income; another one-quarter comes from manufacturing, transportation, and wholesale and retail trade; government and government enterprises, about 13 percent; and, finance, insurance, and real estate almost seven percent. Raleigh is a financial and trade center for much of eastern North Carolina. A large state university, five liberal arts colleges, a church college, a theological seminary, and a state community college are located in the county.

Wake County Schools had a student membership of over 91,000 in 1998-99, a number that has increased by 3000-4000 students each year during the decade. About two-thirds are White, 27 percent Black, 3.6 percent Asian, and three percent Hispanic. The system had a total of 106 schools in 1998-99. Per pupil expenditures from local funds are a bit more than 20 percent higher than the state average per pupil from local funds; the average teacher salary supplement from local funds is about four times the state average supplement from local funds. Just more than one in five students is eligible for free or reduced price lunches, compared to about 39 percent for the state as a whole. In 1998-99, almost 82 percent of students in grades 3-8 performed at or above grade level on state end-of-grade tests, and over 72 percent of high school students scored at or above Level III (proficient) on one or more state end-of-course tests. Nearly 77 percent of students took the Scholastic Assessment Tests in 1998-99, compared to the state total of 61 percent, with an average combined score of 1059, considerably higher than the state average of 986. Average daily attendance for the district was 95.3 percent (94.8 percent statewide). At 3.9 percent overall, the dropout rate for 1997-98 was lower than the state rate of 4.9 percent. The number of violent incidents per 1,000 students in 1997-98 was 6.2, just below the state total of 6.3.

By design, enrollment at Mt. Vernon Redirection fluctuates over the course of the school year. Numbers are purposely limited at the beginning of each school year so as to allow space for new referrals later in the fall and in the spring. No matter what time of the year they are assigned to Mt. Vernon, students remain there for at least the remainder of that school year; short-term enrollment is not permitted. During 1998-99, enrollment ranged from 85 to 110. The maximum number at any given time is limited because of available space.

PHILOSOPHY AND MISSION

The mission statement of Mr. Vernon Redirection proclaims its purpose as "...to provide at-risk students with an opportunity to succeed academically and behaviorally in a supportive, structured educational environment that emphasizes positive reinforcement of achievement." A small student/teacher ratio of approximately 10:1 combined with considerable opportunity for individual and group counseling are seen by staff members as essential components of the school's approach. In addition to its formal mission statement, school staff members have articulated the following seven core beliefs to guide its operation:

- the school should be a safe place to learn;
- all students can be successful;
- effective learning can take place in an alternative setting;
- everyone is important;
- everyone deserves fair treatment;
- everyone deserves to be treated with respect; and,
- everyone should respect oneself, other people, and other people's property.

This orientation is reflected in the comments given by school personnel and parents of students at the school when they were asked to assess the role of the school. Perspectives expressed by those interviewed centered on seeing the school as a place where children who have not been successful in school before are given an opportunity to learn how to be successful, not only now at Mt. Vernon Redirection, but when they return to their home schools. Statements such as these were frequently made: "(the school is) an opportunity for students to leave one path and get on another"; "(it is) a structured, safe blanket for kids who need it"; and, "(it is) a place to keep children in school and interested." Flexibility in educational approach is seen as necessary in order to work successfully with the school's student population. As one teacher note, "If a child can't learn the way we teach, we teach the way they learn." Underscoring this view, another teacher observed that it is necessary to "have flexibility and a big bag of tricks."

More formally, the mission is seen by staff members as working to prepare students for successful transition back to a more traditional middle school setting, incorporating the types of academic and psychosocial interventions that will enhance the students' chances for subsequent school success.

ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

For several years, Mt. Vernon Redirection has served students in grades six through eight. Previously, the school also enrolled ninth graders and provided evening classes for students from throughout the district.

The school has an administrative staff of a principal and two clerical personnel, and a professional support staff that includes a counselor, a school psychologist, and a clinical social worker. The full-time academic teaching staff of nine is supplemented by two vocational education teachers, a special education resource teacher, an in-school suspension teacher, a half-time physical education/health instructor, and a half-time media specialist. Staff for grades seven and eight are organized into teams of teachers and support personnel, while the sixth grade currently operates as a self-contained class. The assistant superintendent noted that she hopes to add a second sixth grade teacher to staff during the next school year.

Students at Mt. Vernon Redirection are drawn from all 20 of the district's middle schools. They are referred based on their inability to function well academically in the regular school and their having disciplinary problems, but problems not severe enough to warrant long-term suspension from the home school. The intent (not always realized in practice) is to have students return to their home schools in the academic year following their attendance at Mt. Vernon Redirection.

Under current procedures, individual schools refer students to Mt. Vernon, with staff members from that school meeting with staff members from Mt. Vernon to discuss the referrals. The program has the authority to say no to a referral, but rarely does. According to one staff member, some principals of referring schools go to the

central office to request placement of given students at Mt. Vernon in order to get around the normal intake process. The current process is a change from that employed in the past when a district-wide committee reviewed referrals and determined who would be placed at the school.

Mt. Vernon Redirection provides the state standard course of study for middle school, including language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, vocational education and/or physical education, and one elective course. Attempts are made to individualize the curriculum as much as possible, given the broad diversity of students at the school, who range from gifted to “academically challenged.” Special education students may attend the school if their special education needs require less than 50 percent of the day to address. Class periods are 42 minutes in length. Breakfast and lunch are served in the school’s cafeteria.

Each quarter, students may take one elective or exploratory course, which is scheduled in combination with an advising period and homeroom period. The choice of electives depends on what the teachers can and will provide, and are available to an individual student on condition of his or her good behavior. On days when a student may be disruptive, he or she is assigned to a supervised study hall in lieu of participating in the elective course. It was also noted that, “in theory,” students can participate in extracurricular activities at their home schools, but in reality this doesn’t happen.

According to the Mt. Vernon principal, the amount of homework assigned to students is usually the first complaint received from parents. Homework is assigned to students here because they will have it in traditional schools and they need to continue to practice. There is less homework assigned at Mt. Vernon than at other schools, he said, and what is assigned is a review of taught material, not new material. Furthermore, he continued, having homework sends a message to parents that, “Yes, we are a real school.” However, he acknowledged, teachers would probably say they would prefer to give up homework so they wouldn’t have to struggle with students who don’t do their assigned work.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Some of the following practices and approaches taken by Mt. Vernon Redirection Middle School may hold promise for other alternative education programs.

Shared Philosophy and Approach

As noted at the beginning of this report, the mission of Mr. Vernon is “to provide at-risk students with an opportunity to succeed...in an environment that emphasizes positive reinforcement of achievement.” Comments from many of those interviewed indicate ways in which this statement of purpose is supported in practice. One teacher described her role as being “more nurturing” than at other schools. Another noted that some students learn best alone and others together with others--“whatever style works.”

A distinguishing feature of the Mt. Vernon approach is its behavior management program, which is designed to foster a sense of responsibility for personal behavior on the part of each student and to encourage development of self-monitoring skills. This clinical/team approach is used in conjunction with the academic component of the curriculum. Students continually engage with their advisors in the process of goal-setting. Individual daily goals for both behavioral performance and academic accomplishment are specified and recorded on a progress sheet which students carry with them each day. Attainment of goals is noted by the school’s staff throughout the day, and a point system is used to reward or sanction student behavior and academic performance. Rules to be followed by all students are printed in an attractive handbook distributed to all students and parents.

Faculty Competence, Collaboration, and Cohesiveness

Success at Mt. Vernon, in the words of the principal, is measured in terms of improved standardized test scores, improved attendance, and improved behavior. The presence of a competent, involved, and caring staff at Mt. Vernon was consistently pointed to by those interviewed as a central reason for this success. “The staff--who they are, the quality, is crucial,” agreed one district administrator. A teacher noted that the staff is close and varied, and

has time to deal with problems.” Another said, “Once you’re here, you don’t want to leave.” Still another, note the family atmosphere and low degree of staff turnover, and remarked, “We celebrate each other’s birthdays, know a lot about each other, and support each other.”

As part of the clinical approach at Mt. Vernon, teaching teams meet at the end of each day to discuss each student’s progress and problems. Each team is led in these discussions by its counselor, and free exchange of ideas, perspectives, and potential solutions to problems is encouraged. Resembling medical “grand rounds,” these daily conferences are seen by the instructional staff as enabling a comprehensive assessment of student progress and student needs.

Student Focused, Individualized Learning Approaches

A parent contrasted the difference between Mt. Vernon Redirection and the regular school her child attended in emphasizing the one-on-one instruction here--“My son understands things here,” she said. One student, when asked what he liked best about the school, said, “The teachers--they’re pretty nice and can spend more time (with me). I now understand stuff.” Another student stated that for him it is easier to learn here; “...not so many people in the classroom to distract you from doing your work.”

One teacher observed that student needs can begin to be addressed almost immediately and that teachers can focus on strengths and needs of the individual, not just teach to the middle. Another teacher noted that there is time for one-on-one analysis (of student needs) and that the comparatively small class sizes are good, especially for students who are far behind. A major difference in teaching here and at regular schools is the goal-oriented structure with daily goals for each student, said one.

Different viewpoints were expressed concerning the degree of individualization that actually takes place. One support staff person with several years of experience at the school commented that, “The program used to be as individualized as could be, with some good group things, such as camping trips, that now have been dropped.” He would like to see a return to more individualized approaches --“Teachers need to have more one-on-one contact.” Others see individualized approaches as having improved, although they suggested that a better job can be done in assessing individual learning styles early on. One teacher said that there is increased individualization now--each student has specific goals that he or she is trying to work on to be able to return to the regular school. Others pointed to the small class sizes as providing time to really listen to students and to give them more attention. Said one, “You don’t just deal with situations, you take time to find out why things happen and work with that; other schools don’t do that.”

Community Connections

Mt. Vernon has established active linkages with a variety of community resources, both public and private. Connections with such diverse groups as the Raleigh Women’s Club, senior citizens homes, the Methodist Home for Children, West Raleigh Exchangetts, the United Cerebral Palsy Center, and the adjacent Bridges Program have afforded students opportunities to interact with the community in a volunteer and service capacity. At the same time the school’s visibility within the community is increased and understanding of its purposes enhanced. The program has adopted other schools for their children to read to younger children. A nearby construction company provided money to Mt. Vernon in return for students washing their trucks.

Local resources such as juvenile court services and the count’s health department and mental health center provide assistance to students. Non-profit groups such as Drug Action of Raleigh, Haven House, Wrenn House, VISTA Youth Employment, and the Wilderness Camping Program are in close contact with the school.

All of these connections appear to facilitate the school’s holistic approach to student development.

Communication/Coordination with the District Administration and County School Board

Opinions of the degree to which there is communication and/or coordination with district administrators and with the School Board vary among those interviewed. These variations may be a function of the particular assignments of these persons.

The principal believes the superintendent to be supportive of Mt. Vernon Redirection and noted that he had been on campus at least four times in the four years the principal has been there. It was pointed out that an assistant superintendent has been on campus a number of times and that following a personnel evaluation visit from the area superintendent, funds were forthcoming for technology improvements. The school board member assigned to the school visits from time to time to observe or participate in various school activities.

The assistant superintendent interviewed said that some members of the district administration occasionally raise a question about whether the cost per child is worth it, but that the program has been well-received by the School Board; a presentation last year to the Board was received very positively.

One teacher made the observation (shared by several others) that “we don’t see them (central office administrators), but we must be okay, since we’re still open.” Another said she is not sure that the administration truly values what is done at Mt. Vernon because “we get the leftovers, the discards (equipment and materials); we’re not squeaky enough to get our needs met.” Others expressed the opinion that the central administration doesn’t see the school as important, that “these are throw-away kids.”

EXPRESSED ISSUES AND NEEDS

Additional Courses and Staff

Administrators, staff, and students alike at Mr. Vernon expressed the desire for additional courses and faculty to teach them. The principal and some teachers noted a need for an additional sixth grade teacher (as noted earlier, the assistant superintendent anticipates that need to be met next year). A number of teachers, together with one professional support staff member, recommended adding a ninth grade to the school. The principal supported this in saying that he would consider adding a ninth grade; however, he was opposed to going beyond adding a tenth grade because of the wide age span among students what would result.

Teachers, support staff, and students all identified a need for vocational education courses. One student was specific in expressing his desire for “woodworking,” while another said he would like courses in “technology--how to build houses.”

Also recommended by several teachers are courses or programs in arts, music, and drama. Others called for the addition of a reading teacher and tutorial assistance in reading and mathematics. A full-time physical education teacher is seen as a need by the principal. He also mentioned needing a second full-time counselor, noting that the school psychologist now acts in a support capacity to supplement existing counseling services. One teacher suggested having a social worker who could visit in homes to further the aims of the program with students’ families. In calling for additional support staff, another teacher observed that “...there is always a need for more support people in order to provide positive role models for kids and to make sure there is always someone available for a kid when needed.”

Modifications in Program Administration

Facilities issues were widely cited by staff members as being of major concern to the Mt. Vernon program at this time. Although now occupying a new building, it was not built large enough to accommodate a growing program, and, in fact, some classes occupy rooms in an adjacent building intended for use by another program. There are plans to add one or more trailers next year for Redirection, but this is seen as a stop-gap solution. This, together with the school’s location on campus with other buildings that were condemned, is seen as sending a message to students and the public that the school is somehow a “less worthy” member of the district, according to some of those interviewed. Some also expressed the feeling that Mt. Vernon is placed low on the district’s priority list for enhancements such as computer upgrades and technology improvements.

Difficulties with the funding and budgeting process involving the school also surfaced during interviews. With respect to funds, one person observed that it’s a “numbers game, based on per pupil expenditures during the

preceding year.” Except for salaries, it was said, this process does not provide enough money for (adequate) program operations.

Attention was also called to student transportation. Currently, some students are transported to their assigned home school and from there to the centrally-located Mt. Vernon. In many cases, this results in extensive bus rides for students and the principal expressed concern that he “doesn’t know the impact these long rides home have on the students.”

Improving Coordination with Other Schools

The most frequently mentioned concern in how the program operates relates to what happens to students when they leave Mt. Vernon and return to a regular school. As the assistant superintendent puts it, there is a need to follow-up students during their transition back to their home base schools; she noted that there are some meetings, but the current process is not satisfactory. The social worker said, “There needs to be a transitional piece because when kids go back they are lost--many want to come back here.” He went on to say that last year he and the school psychologist started identifying a person at each home school as a contact--they do meet from time to time to check on returned students. A teacher confirmed that this year a staff person from Mt. Vernon will go to other schools to check. In any event, there is consensus among staff interviewed that a major program need is a formal process to help ensure a smooth transition for students in the first few months after they leave Mt. Vernon and return to a traditional school.

Enhanced Education and Training

The degree to which faculty and staff at Mt. Vernon believe their formal education experiences prepared them to work in an alternative education setting differed among the individuals interviewed. Some said it was of no use, others noted that it prepared them for the subjects they teach only, and one said, “My minor in religion and philosophy was more important than my (subject area) background. If you work with these students, you will be challenged.” Most of these persons received their undergraduate education several years ago, but one teacher was a more recent college graduate. “I had a lot of practice teaching time,” she said, “and I practice taught at the school where I was first employed.” Several pointed to raising children of their own and/or teaching in pre-schools as important to their understanding of stages in human development and the best preparation they had for teaching in an alternative school. One teacher expressed the opinion that teachers (coming out of education schools) don’t know what an alternative education school is. “They need to know,” she said, “Everything in a regular school is geared to students in the middle. There, they can refer other students out. Here, all the students are the ones they refer out.” One suggestion was that practice teaching in an alternative school be made a viable option. Others were of the opinion that teaching in regular school should be prerequisite to teaching in an alternative school.

Several of the teachers noted professional development/staff development experiences that have been helpful to them. They include classes in reality therapy, control theory, and cooperative discipline although not too many of these are directed toward alternative schools, they said. Most of the best professional development, noted at least one teacher, has been through our colleagues. Courses in classroom management when there are students performing at every grade level in one class, in managing transitions back to the regular school, and in computer technology were among the formal activities suggested for the future. Informally, there was a desire expressed to spend more time together as a staff, perhaps in off-campus retreats, for visiting other alternative education sites, and for sharing experiences with teachers in other programs. Staff development should be for everyone, both academic and support personnel, it was emphasized; however, one teacher observed that the staff is now at a point where each person has a different set of professional development needs.